LOVE STORIES OF THE REAL WEST

RANCH ROMANCES

20c

The Flaming Trail

A Cattle Country Romance

By

Frank C. Robertson

Hearts of the Open Range

A Complete Western Love Story

By

William Colt MacDonald

First July Number

L. L. COOKE
—the man who has trained and helped many thousands of other men into Big-Pay electrical jobs in all parts of the world.

I WILL TRAIN You at HOME

Learn to Make It
in the big pay field Electricity

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"Dear Mr. Cooke: I was making $26 a week, when I enrolled. Now with my own Electrical Shop I make as high as $30 a day."
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DON'T be a wage slave all your life—don't spend your best days in a miserable $25 to $35 a week job—pinching the pennies and barely making ends meet—when thousands of men no smarter nor luckier than you, are drawing down $70 to $200 every Saturday as "Cooke" Trained Electrical Experts. It's your own fault if you don't do the same. Blame yourself if your pay is small when I've made it so easy for you to learn to earn $3,500 to $10,000 a year in Electricity!

Be a "Cooke" Trained Man

I'll show you how—in your spare time—in the quiet of your own home—without losing a minute from your regular job! I'll train you in a clear, simple, quickly-grasped unforgettable way with my famous "Work Sheet" and "Job Ticket" Method—the same method that has landed more than 10,000 fellows like you in $3,500 to $10,000 a year jobs—the same method that Electrical men are praising and great Electrical concerns recommend to their employees.

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Don't think for a minute that you need a college education or a high school diploma to become a "Cooke" Trained Big-Pay Man. You don't! Mighty few of my "boys" ever went farther than grade school. But that was no drawback. With the Six Big Outfits of tools and apparatus that I furnish without extra charge, they got simplified, practical training along work shop lines. They learned by doing—they learned thoroughly—just as if I was constantly at their elbow. And in no time at all they were experts—commanding, and getting, Big-Pay!

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Investigate—Mail Coupon

Don't delay! Get started! Mail coupon right now for my Big Book—the same book that has raised the pay of thousands of men—the book that will show you—yes, prove to you—why "The COOKE Trained Man is The BIG-PAY Man"—always and everywhere! It's FREE—just mail coupon—at once!

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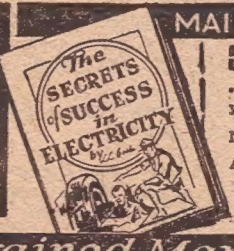
There are Thousands of Big Pay Jobs to be had!

BIG OUTFITS at no extra cost



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The "Cooke" Trained Man is the "Big Pay" Man

RANCH ROMANCES

W. M. CLAYTON, Publisher *BINA FLYNN, Editor*

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A RIDIN' RED HEAD
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By Dale Denver

THE VEGAS KID RETURNS
A NOVELETTE
By John Johnson

Yearly Subscription $4.00 **This Issue Dated July 10, 1927** **Single Copies 20 Cents**

HAROLD HERSEY, President
Issued semi-monthly by
WESTERN STORIES PUBLISHING CORPORATION
799 Broadway, New York
BINA FLYNN, Secretary

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Only 28 years old and earning $15,000 a year

Works in Shoe Factory

W. T. Carson was forced to leave school at an early age. His help was needed at home. He took a "job" in a shoe factory in Huntington, W. Va., at $12 a week.

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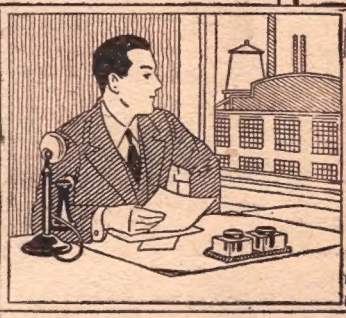
Carson determined to make something of himself before it was too late, so he took up a course with the International Correspondence Schools and studied in spare time.



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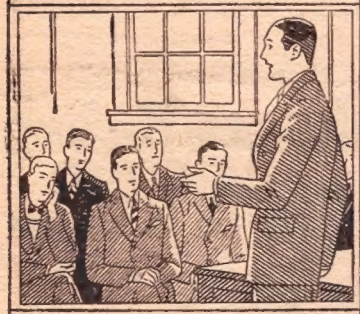

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Name.....

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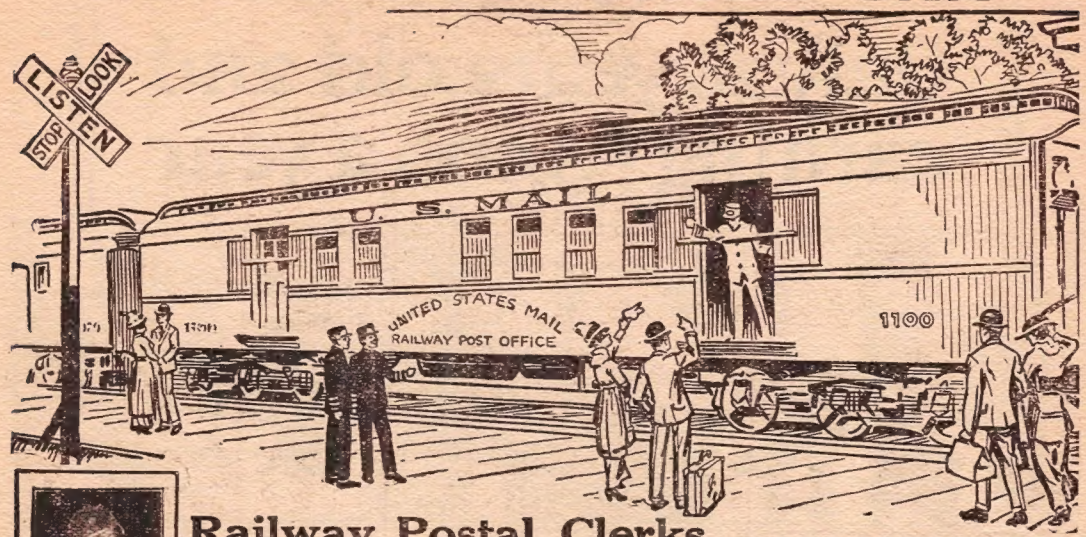

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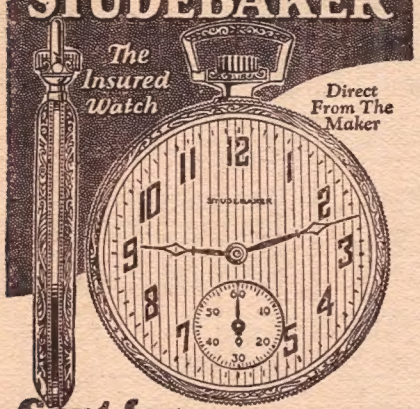

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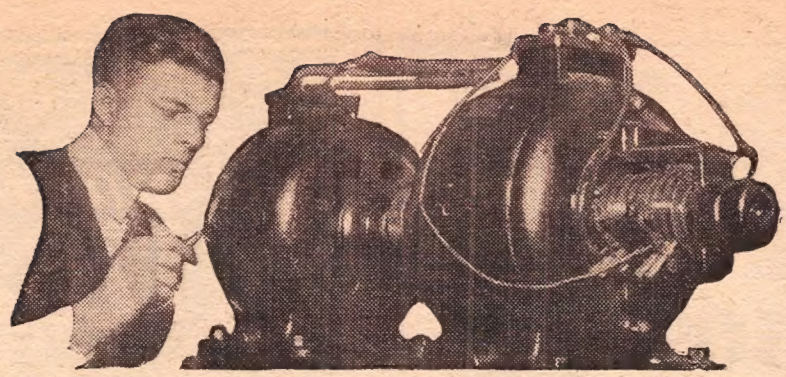

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Learn Without Lessons in 90 DAYS

LACK of experience—age, or advanced education bars no one. I don't care if you don't know an armature from an air brake—I don't expect you to! It makes no difference! Don't let lack of money stop you. Most of the men at Coyne have no more money than you have. That's why I have worked out my astonishing offers.

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JOBS OPEN

Here are a few of hundreds of positions open to Coyne-trained men. Our free employment bureau puts you in touch with openings to choose from.

Armature Expert $100 a Week
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Auto Electrician $110 a Week
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Coyne is your one great chance to get into electricity. Every obstacle is removed. This school is 28 years old—Coyne training is tested—proven beyond all doubt—endorsed by electrical industry. You can find out everything absolutely free. Simply mail the coupon and let me send you the big, free Coyne book of 150 photographs . . . facts . . . jobs . . . salaries . . . opportunities. Tells you how many earn expenses while training and how we assist our graduates in the field. This does not obligate you. So act at once. Just mail coupon.

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Founded 1899

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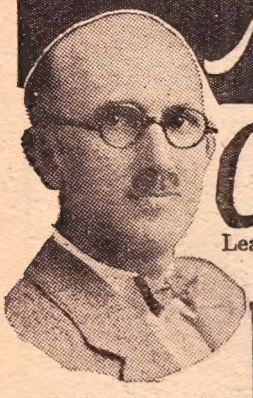

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—to prove you can learn at home in spare time!

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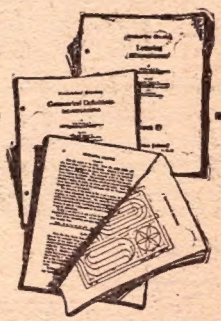
Your offer to send me three lessons free and facts about the opportunities in Drafting and about your course, looks good to me. It is understood I am not obligated in any way in making this request.

Name .....

Address .....

Occupation ..... *Age* .....



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1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. B-156 Chicago, Illinois

The Roamin' Rustler!

A POEM OF THE RANGE

S. Omar Barker

OH, brandin' is the cowboy's way
Of markin' ownership:
With Two Bar O or Diamond A
On shoulder, ribs or hip.

AND then some rustler on the snoop,
With runnin' iron in hand,
Comes ridin' by with hungry loop
An' messes up the brand.

BUT, folks, they's one cowpuncher lad
That sometimes rides the range—
Don't wear no chaps—goes plumb unclad—
Whose brand is hard to change!

HE don't mark cows, but in the hearts
Of punchers wild an' free,
He burns his brand with happy darts
That spell "L-O-V-E."

HIS loop is looks from lovely eyes,
That set yore heart a-whirl.
He slips up on you in the guise
Of ridin' rangeland girl.

THERE ain't no use to beller, boy,
He'll brand you jest the same,
An' start you up the Trail to Joy—
Ol' Cupid is his name!

RAMBLIN' ROUND THE RANCH

These are the busy days around the Double R ranch.

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Do not miss the Second July Issue!

If you do, you'll be plumb sorry!

And I'm not taking you for a buck-board ride!

Bing Flynn

Editor: RANCH ROMANCES.

Hearts of the Open Range

By
William Colt MacDonald

When a range girl trusts an outlaw and defends him against all and sundry, you may be sure it is because the instinctive sense of fair play which is the heritage of the open range prompts her to go swiftly and fearlessly to the side of one she believes wronged.

CHAPTER I

"Tony"

MORNING in Deed City. The sun, already broiling hot, blazing down on a scattered huddle of adobe huts and false-fronted buildings. Occasionally from the sand and alkali wastes surrounding the town came a breath of air, stirring to listless life the dust of the streets, unoccupied now save by a few pedestrians called forth, despite the furnace-like heat of the day, on urgent business. Mostly, folks were indoors at this hour, although a row of lounging figures was to be seen seated on the shaded veranda of the Deed City House, the town's one hotel. This was the usual audience which seemed to have little else to do but attend the arrival and departure of the daily stagecoach.

A girl passed through the wide, double-doored entrance of the hotel and out onto the veranda. Here she hesitated a moment and swept the line of lounging figures with a cool, impersonal glance,

then continued on her way to the old-fashioned coach standing in the street a few yards off. There was a lithe grace in her swinging walk that showed her to to be no product of any Eastern state. She was dressed in riding-boots, corduroy divided skirt and mannish flannel shirt, open at the throat to display a firm neck radiant with the flush of youth.

Her shoulders were erect; her figure boyish. Topping the bronze-gold hair was a stiff-brimmed Stetson, while sagging from the cartridge belt that encircled her slim hips was a holstered Colt's thirty-eight. The girl's eyes were deep blue, bordering at times on violet, and shaded by long, black, curling lashes. The rest of her features were exquisite, cameo-like, with the exception of the chin, which was almost too determined to adhere strictly to the accepted standards of beauty. While not exactly the type to be termed beautiful, Antoinette Alden was decidedly attractive.

As the girl tripped lightly down the steps fronting the width of the Deed City House veranda, Tug Harris, one of the loungers sitting back against the wall of the building, let down his tilted chair squarely on all four legs. A sudden grunt of approval escaped his lips as he eyed the girl with frank admiration.

"Who's the filly, Zach?" Tug inquired of the gray-haired man sitting at his elbow.

Old Zach Cortree, driver of the stage that made the trip from Deed City to Oreana Wells, of the same county, shifted his grizzled bulk, spat a long stream of tobacco juice over the veranda railing, then answered the query. "That's Sheriff Alden's niece, Antoinette Alden—called 'Tony' for short. She's visitin' at Alden's ranch this summer. Just got in on the Limited last night. I met her last year when she was here."

Cortree's companion again transferred his attentions to the girl's figure as she threw open the swinging door of the coach and climbed inside. When she had dropped from view on one of the cushioned seats, Tug Harris again turned to Cortree. "Tony Alden, eh? She looks like she was more used to forkin' a cow-pony than bumpin' along in a stage."

Old Zach nodded reminiscently. "She is—just that! I 'member last year when she was here how she helped out the sheriff at beef round-up. The Double-A was kinda short-handed, so she took her place an' cut an' herded with the best of 'em. I was watchin' her one day, an' it sure made me wish I could shed 'bout twenty years off'n my wuthless career. Yuh don't need no college eddication to appreciate that gal, Tug." He sighed deeply and went on. "Sheriff Alden told me once that she could throw a rope or handle a six-gun with any of his punchers. Her pappy's got a big spread up in Idaho, so I reckon cow-l'arnin' comes sorta nat'-ral to her."

"I should think," Tug Harris commented, "that Sheriff Alden would either sell his ranch or give up sheriffin'. It's too much of a job for one man to handle, even if he has got a good foreman an' a willin' bunch of waddies workin' for'm."

"That's what Art Alden calc'lates to do," Cortree returned. "Election's next spring an' he don't reckon to run again. He didn't want the sheriff's office in the fust place. It was kinda forced on him by the citizens of the county in the hope that Alden would be able to catch Don Bandido—"

"Said citizens pro'bly being led by Hawk Larsen, I take it," Harris put in.

"Yeah—leastwise Larsen's the heaviest loser to the Don, so he pro'bly had a heap to do with it."

"I wonder why Larsen don't take the Don's trail hisself."

Cortree again shot a long brown stream over the railing—this time with something of disgust. "Shucks! Larsen has been out a dozen times, but couldn't even find a trace of the Don. If yuh was to ask me, I'd say that Hawk ain't any too fond of meetin' up with the Don, anyway."

Harris frowned. "I don't see why not. Larsen's the fastest gun around here—"

"Except, mebbe, Don Bandido," Cortree cut in. "From all I hears, that danged outlaw is lightnin' on the draw an' plumb accurate when he unravels his lead. Any-

way, if Larsen don't watch his step, Don Bandido'll be stealin' the hull Arrow-M outfit right out from under his eyes."

Harris laughed shortly. "From what I hear, that wouldn't bother many folks. Hawk Larsen ain't so popular as he might be. Some people think he got hold of the Arrow-M Ranch by underhanded methods—"

Cortree held up a hand for silence. "*Sh!* Yuh might git yoreself in trouble, Tug, if Larsen had any friends around here an' they told him what yuh said. He's a mean customer to deal with, an' what you think—or for that matter, what I think—had best be kept under cover."

"Mebbe you're right," Harris agreed, "but I'd like to know just how Hawk Larsen got hold of the Arrow-M. I wasn't here at the time he took it over, an' I ain't ever met nobody what could give me the straight of the affair. All I know is that a man by the name of Dick March used to own the ranch. Him an' his son—Donald was the boy's name if I remember correct—was runnin' the outfit. Then I heard that young March killed his father—"

"They ain't so much to tell," Cortree interrupted. "Larsen was foreman for March at that time. It come out at the inquest that Larsen went up to the ranch house one mornin' an' found Dick March, with two bullets through his heart, layin' on the ground near the door. Larsen testified that he went into the house to wake March's son, Donald, an' on a table near the boy's bed was a six-gun with two dead ca'tridges in it. It was the same calibre as killed March. Larsen woke the boy up an' accused him of the murder. 'Course, young March denied any knowledge of it, but Larsen took him in to the sheriff at Oreana Wells, at the point of a gun. The boy never come to trial, 'cause he escaped two nights after he was put in jail. Ain't never been heard of since—"

"But how did Larsen get control of the Arrow-M?" Harris cut in.

"Hawk produced a will leavin' it to him, which he said March had given him the night before he was killed," Cortree informed. "The will wasn't witnessed, an' a lot of folks thought mebbe the signature was a forgery. They was a heap of talk 'bout makin' an investigation, but nothin' ever come of it. Finally the whole affair was forgot. In the meantime, Larsen hung close to the ranch, an' he holds it to this day."

Conversation lapsed for a few minutes. Cortree glanced in the direction of the stagecoach to see Antoinette Alden beckoning to him. He rose to his feet and walked down the steps to the side of the vehicle.

"Was yuh wantin' me, Miss Alden?" he asked, doffing his flop-brimmed old sombrero.

"Nobody else," the girl smiled. "When do we leave?"

"Jest a minnit, I'll see," Old Zach grunted. He pulled from his vest pocket a large, nickel-plated watch. Studying it gravely for a few moments, he announced, after first squinting at the sun, "It's jest twenty-two minutes to nine. My orders says I gotta leave on the hour. Looks like you'd be my only passenger—"

"On the hour!" Tony exclaimed. "Why that schedule up in the hotel says you're due to start at eight-thirty a.m."

"That was changed coupla months ago," Cortree placidly informed the girl. "They ain't put up the new schedule yet."

Tony frowned her annoyance, then flashed him a smile that, old as he was, made Zach's heart skip several beats. "I wish I'd known that," she said. "It's mighty hot out here in the sun."

"Why don't yuh come up on the porch an' wait, miss?"

Tony glanced at the veranda, then shook her head. "No, I guess I'll wait here."

Cortree read her glance. "I ain't blamin' yuh," he said. "They oughta be a law to keep that bunch of loafers from warmin' the chairs every day—"

At that moment he was interrupted by a man who came staggering down the hotel steps under the weight of a small but heavy oaken strong-box. "Gimme a hand up with this, will yuh, Zach?" the man puffed as he drew near the coach.

Cortree quickly climbed to the top of

the conveyance, then reached down and secured a firm grip on the box. Finally it was deposited on the roof of the vehicle and strapped to the side-railing alongside of Tony's trunk.

"Whew!" Cortree breathed his relief when the task was completed. "What in tarnation we carryin' this time, Sam?"

"The usual mail an' so on," Sam answered, "but in addition we got over eighteen thousand bucks in gold in the box."

"Holy Jehoshophat!" Old Zach exclaimed. "Eighteen thousand dollars!" He clambered excitedly down to the ground. "Who's all that for?"

"Tuh be delivered to Hawk Larsen at Oreana Wells," came the answer. "Larsen's figgerin' to buy some minin' property, I hear, from somebody what insists on cash on the nail."

"Hmm—eighteen thousand dollars is a heap of money," Cortree mused. He turned suddenly and introduced the guard to Tony Alden. "This is my guard, Sam Hardwin—Miss Alden—"

"I'm glad to know you, Mr. Hardwin—" the girl commenced, when a sudden shout from down the street broke in on the conversation.

Cortree and the guard looked up to discover a cloud of dust traveling rapidly along the wagon-rutted street. The cloud grew larger, then out of it emerged a sweat-streaked horse bearing a rider whose right shoulder was stained crimson.

As the horse was hauled back to haunches in a sudden sliding stop, its rider leaped from the saddle, both feet hitting the ground at the same moment. He wavered a little, then started for the hotel. Before he had traveled three yards a crowd had gathered around him and impeded further progress.

"Looks like somebody's been tanglin' with ol' man trouble," Cortree muttered as he started toward the knot of men.

Sam Hardwin had stepped forward. "Sure looks like it, Zach," he answered.

"You better stay an' watch that gold, Sam," Cortree advised from the corner of his mouth as he hurried on. "This might be a stunt to do some stick-up stuff."

Hardwin stopped suddenly, a sheepish smile on his face, then returned to the coach. Cortree continued on and reached the excited circle of men in time to hear the last few words of the wounded rider.

"—and then he pulled an' let me have it!" the man was relating.

"What's up?" Cortree questioned, pushing his burly form through the crowd.

"Don Bandido — shot my partner — plugged me," the man answered in short jerky sentences. "Come right into our camp—shot without no warnin'!"

Little by little the story was told. The rider wasn't hurt badly; his wound was little more than a scratch that bled profusely. In a few minutes Cortree returned to the coach.

"What's the trouble?" Tony Alden asked.

"Oh, that damn'—excuse me, miss—that darn Don Bandido is on the prod again. He—"

"Don Bandido?" the girl queried. "Who is he? Hmm—Don Bandido—'Gentleman Bandit,' eh? Who is he, another of these Mexican outlaws that raid along the Border down here every so often?"

"Naw, he ain't no Mex," Cortree answered. "White man, from all I hear, although he trails with a Mex crowd. I can't tell yuh much about him, Miss Alden, 'ceptin' he shows up in this section every so often an' pulls a job. Mostly, Hawk Larsen of the Arrow-M is the victim. The Don seems to hold a grudge against them Arrow-M waddies, somehow. That feller that just rode in is one of Larsen's men. Him an' his pal was coverin' a herd this mornin' when Don Bandido rode up an' plugged the two of 'em. The other man was killed! This one escaped. Then the Don an' his gang run off the cattle—"

"Somethin' funny there," Hardwin broke in. "From all I hear, the Don ain't such a rotten shot that he'd let anybody escape less'n he let him. Here's somethin' else that looks funny: howcome them Arrow-M hombres to be campin' nearer to Deed City than Oreana Wells?"

"Yuh got me, I didn't think to ask him," Cortree returned in some perplexity.

"Larsen's ranch is a darn sight closer to Oreana Wells than here."

"Was the man badly hurt?" Tony asked.

Cortree shook his head. "Nope, just a mite of skin lost."

"And you say this Don Bandido shot them without warning?" Tony asked in some disbelief.

"That's what the hombre says," replied Cortree, shrugging his shoulders. Then he added in a lower tone, "Just between the three of us, I wouldn't believe none of them Arrow-M waddies under oath. They're all liars!"

"Yes, an' from what I've heard of the Don," Hardwin put in, "he ain't the sort to be doin' no killin' in cold blood that-a-way. 'Course, he does do a heap of rustlin' an' such, but some of them greasers over the Border swear by him, so he can't be very bad."

"Yeah, they swear by him; the people this side of the line swear *at* him—" Zach broke off suddenly as a look of consternation appeared on his leathery face. Finally he spoke, "Do yuh know, Sam, I kinda wish we didn't have that gold with us!"

"Why, what difference does it make?" Even as Hardwin spoke the words, a sudden frown furrowed his forehead, and he added, "Thinkin' 'bout Don Bandido, eh? Gosh! That does complicate matters if he's workin' this neck of the range again."

"Darn that Larsen, anyway!" Cortree grumbled. "Him sendin' for eighteen thousand cash gold—that's sure puttin' plenty risk on us with the Don runnin' loose."

"Yeah, an' if the Don runs into us an' lifts the money, the Express Company stands to lose a heap of prestige an' business," the guard answered. "And, besides, it'd have to make good the loss."

The girl sat back smiling at their problem. "You carry a gun, don't you, Mr. Hardwin?"

"Yeah, I carry a gun—sawed-off scatter gun, miss," Hardwin replied somewhat dubiously, "but against the Don—well, I don't know—" The sentence remained unfinished as his voice trailed off into silence.

There was something of scorn in Tony's eyes when next she spoke, "Well, then, I don't see any use of waiting here any longer. It must be 'way past starting time. You have your shot-gun and the driver and I have our six-shooters. Are we going to let a common outlaw scare us from leaving?"

"But he ain't no common outlaw, miss—" Hardwin commenced.

"Shucks! Miss Alden's right, Sam," Cortree cut in gruffly. "Come on, we'll get movin'. Mebbe we won't even see the Don."

Something in the girl's eye bolstered up their nerve, and the two men began to feel ashamed of their fears.

"Righto!" Hardwin assented confidently. "I reckon we got enough artillery to take care of ourselves should we have any trouble."

He turned and climbed to the driver's seat, followed by Zach Cortree, while Tony settled herself to a more comfortable position for the long ride which lay ahead of her.

The group on the veranda of the Deed City House rose to its feet. "Better not start, Zach," someone yelled advice. "Don Bandido will get yuh sure as shootin'!"

Zach cast a scornful glance at the man. "Not us, he won't, feller. We'll go through like a cannon-ball outta Hades!" A cheer burst from the veranda. Zach rose to his feet, holding the reins in his sinewy brown hands. The tip of his long whip sailed out over the horses' heads—cracked like a shot out of a rifle! "Jump into it!" Zach bawled. "Pull, yuh long-legged puppies, pull your hearts out! Get a-movin' now-w-w-w-w!"

As the last word left his lips, the horses strained against the traces, their hoofs digging into the ground. The coach commenced to move. A few minutes more and the horses were in full stride, snaking along at a tremendous rate.

In no time at all the vehicle had reached the edge of town where the rough road flattened out across unbroken prairie. A short time later all that could be seen of the coach, from the Deed City House, was a rolling cloud of dust that grew smaller

and smaller as the ancient conveyance bumped and lurched behind the galloping horses.

CHAPTER II

Hold-Up

SHORTLY before one in the afternoon Cortree pulled the sweating horses to a panting stop at Ardiente. Ardiente couldn't be called a town. It was just a small settlement of sun-baked 'dobe huts, important only as a stop along the stage-route. Aside from the proprietor of a small general store, the bartender in the Torero Saloon, and two white men at the stage station, the inhabitants of Ardiente were Mexicans. Dirty, naked children, chickens, and mangy dogs moved in the dust of the road under the broiling mid-day sun. A few of the Mexicans, sleeping in the shade of buildings when the coach arrived, yawned, sleepily eyed the girl as she stepped to the ground, then rolled over and resumed their interrupted slumbers.

Tony made her way to a nearby *fonda* for a bite to eat, while fresh horses were brought out and harnessed to the coach. Meanwhile Zach Cortree and his guard headed for the Torero Saloon a few doors farther on.

Three-Star George, the owner of the Torero, had glasses and a bottle waiting for them when they entered the cool, dim interior of the building. "Hello, Zach," he greeted. "H'are yuh, Sam?"

They answered his salutations, then proceeded to pour drinks. Hardwin didn't linger near the bar when his drink was consumed, but, ever watchful of the gold in his care, made his way to the doorway, where he stood keeping a wary eye on all who came near the coach.

"What's the matter with Sam to-day?" Three-Star George asked. "Looks like he's afraid somebody might steal that broken-down, useless ol' ruin of your'n."

Zach overlooked the insult to his coach. " 'Tain't the stage we're afeared o' losin'," he replied. "It's what's on it. We're carryin' eighteen thousand gold for Hawk Larsen."

The bartender stared a moment. "Suff'rin' rattlesnake puppies!" he exclaimed at last. "That'd sure make a pretty haul for somebody."

"Yuh ain't tellin' us nothin' we ain't thought about," Zach replied uncomfortably. "We got Sheriff Alden's niece with us, too. A pretty gal an' a wad o' cash. If that ain't enough to tempt any enterprisin' an' ambitious hold-up man, things has sure changed a-plenty! I hear Don Bandido is rangin' these parts, too. Yessiree! I'll be plumb pleased to roll into Oreana Wells."

Three-Star George laughed softly. "Looks like yuh was afraid of the Don stickin' yuh up," he observed.

"I ain't denyin' it none," Zach admitted. "I don't suppose yuh heard about him shootin' up them two Arrow-M punchers—" He broke off, took another drink, and told the story.

The barkeeper looked dubious when Zach had finished. "Don't look right nohow to me, Zach. The Don ain't the sort to ride into nobody's camp an' commence shootin' promiscuous. I'm bettin' they's more to the story than that feller let on."

"Mebbe so, mebbe so," Zach agreed. Then, as a sudden idea occurred to him, "Seems tuh me, Geo'ge, that you're almighty friendly to Don Bandido. Know anythin' about him?"

There was no answer for a moment or two. At last George spoke. "I ain't sayin' I do, nor I ain't sayin' I don't," he replied slowly. "I don't know him personal, if that's what yuh mean, Zach. On the other hand, I'm admittin' to yuh that he was in town last night—"

"What? Here in Ardiente?" Zach gasped his amazement.

The other nodded. "Exactly! Yuh know, all these greasers here think he's a reg'lar little tin Gawd on wheels. They won't tell me much about him, but he seems to do a lot for poor folks. Brings 'em medicine an' groceries an' such when they're in need. It ain't no wonder the law can't lay hands on him. The Mexicans is the only ones what knows his movements, an' they won't give no information."

"I s'pose not," Zach sighed. "It's too danged bad yuh couldn't nab him when he was in town last night, though. They's a nice reward offered for his capture."

"Shucks! I didn't even know he'd been here until this mornin'. 'Sides, if I'd knowed, I wouldn't make no attempt to hold him. I don't crave to cross guns with that hombre. I'm peaceful, I am!"

They talked a few minutes more until the conversation was interrupted by Sam Hardwin at the door. "Horses ready, Zach," he called.

"Comin'," Zach answered. "So-long, Geo'ge."

"So-long," the bartender echoed.

A minute more and Zach and his guard had climbed to the top of the coach. Tony Alden had already resumed her seat. Zach cracked his long whip and the stage rumbled out of Ardiente.

An hour passed while the vehicle and its occupants passed over the flat, sage-dotted country. Two hours drifted by. The sun was swinging far to the west by the time the horses reached the foothills of the San Alejo Range.

It was all upgrade work now, and Cortree checked the horses down to a slower gait as he swung the animals off to the El Roto Trail which wound through the mountains to the other side of the range, then flattened out and in time became the main street of Oreana Wells. But that was still some distance away. As the trail led through mountains, uphill and downhill, past deep-timbered draws and through narrow, high-walled canyons, Zach commenced to feel more secure.

"Looks like they won't nobody try to stop us to-day, Sam," he commented, swinging the horses around a bad hole in the road.

The guard shifted his cud, expectorated dubiously, and shrugged his shoulders. "Mebbe so, but I ain't countin' on nothin' until we reach Oreana Wells," he grunted. "The fact that Three-Star George says that Don Bandido was in Ardiente last night ain't makin' me feel none to easy in my mind!"

By this time the coach had reached a stretch of trail passing between two steep walls of granite that sloped upward from the hard-packed road over which the horses were traveling. Brush, growing in places higher than the coach, bordered its sides. At spots scrub-oak or piñon jutted abruptly out from the sides of the trail, leaving barely enough room for the passage of the stage.

Suddenly, as Cortree slowed the horses almost to a walk to negotiate a sharp angle in the canyon, there came from the brush at the side of the road the thundering report of a Colt's forty-five! At the same instant Sam Hardwin groaned and slumped over against Zach's left shoulder, the shot-gun on his lap clattering to the road!

"Hold-up, by damn!" Cortree cursed. He didn't have to be ordered what to do. He knew! Footing the brake with no little force, he sawed and tugged at the reins, hauling the horses back to haunches. Then he elevated his hands high in the air, at the same time casting a sidelong glance at his partner. Again he gave his attention to the road.

The next moment three masked men stepped from the brush at the side of the trail, leveled six-shooters in hands.

"That's the idea, mister," one of them growled. He appeared to be the leader and wore above the bandanna mask a steeple-crowned Mexican sombrero heavily embroidered with gold thread. "Keep them hands high, an' yuh won't get hurt!" Then he turned and called toward the brush. "Keep him covered, boys. If he moves, shoot to kill!"

Cortree said nothing, but his eyes strayed to the brush. There, screened by the tangle of manzanita, cat's-claw, and cactus, he could make out the dim outlines of a man's sombrero. Nearby was another, then a third. Below, each had a long blue rifle barrel pointed directly at old Zach! This was serious; Zach strained to get his hands a bit higher if possible.

"What's the trouble, driver?" came Tony's voice from the interior of the coach.

"Hold-up!" Zach called back briefly. The words were hardly out of his mouth when he heard the hammer of Tony's gun

click back. "Yuh better not start nothin', Miss Alden," the old driver added. "They's three of 'em here in the road, an' three more coverin' us from the brush."

At the sound of the girl's voice the leader of the bandits started, then made his way around to the door of the vehicle. He stuck his head inside just in time to receive the full force of Tony's hand as it descended with no little violence across his cheek!

"You keep your head out of here, mister," Tony snapped angrily, but with no fear.

The man jumped back with a sudden howl of rage, fixing his mask which had been disarranged by the blow. "Yuh damn little spit-fire," he snarled. "You come outta there *pronto!*"

The next instant he found himself staring into the round black muzzle of Tony's six-shooter. "Maybe you'd like to make me come out," she was saying contemptuously. "It takes more than one of you two-bit bandits to scare me—"

"Drop the gun, gal!" came a sudden rough voice from the other side of the coach.

Tony half-turned to find herself gazing into the muzzle of a gun. The tables had been turned; one of the bandits had come to the aid of his chief, leaving the third man to keep an eye on Zach Cortree.

For an instant Tony was tempted to pull trigger. Then her better judgment prevailed and she slowly replaced the gun in holster.

"Now, come outta there, like I told yuh in the first place!" the leader rasped.

Tony didn't hesitate this time. She rose from her seat, pushed back the door of the coach, and descended to the ground. In another moment the man had disarmed her and stuck the gun in the waistband of his trousers.

Despite their masks and Mexican sombreros, Tony was sure the men were Americans. "I believe you're this Don Bandido I've been hearing about," she laughed scornfully. "A fine *gentleman bandit* you are—holding up women!"

"Yeah, I'm Don Bandido," came the savage admission, "an' I want yuh to keep your mouth shut. If yuh don't I'm li'ble to shut it for yuh—Here," he called to the other man who had just come around the back of the coach, "keep your eye on this yearlin', Hank. I'll go help out up front there."

He left Tony and made his way up to the front of the coach, where Zach sat gazing down at the man who was keeping a gun trained on him. Zach's arms were getting tired, but he didn't dare lower them. By this time he had been made to unbuckle his belt and toss it, together with his holstered six-shooter, to the ground. At Zach's side Sam Hardwin was just regaining consciousness. The bullet from the bandit's gun had cut a wide furrow along his forehead, and, although not seriously hurt, the guard was still somewhat stunned.

"Well, what yuh waitin' for?" the leader growled, after casting a glance up at Cortree. "C'mon, you, driver, toss down that strong-box!"

"That strong-box ain't goin' to do yuh no good," Zach returned as calmly as he could. "They ain't nothin' in it."

"Did yuh hear me?" the bandit roared angrily. "I said to toss down that strong-box! I ain't askin' yuh again." His hand tilted the gun he held until it covered Zach.

The old driver shrugged his shoulders, then climbed back to the top of the coach and loosened the straps that held the box in place. A moment more and it had landed heavily in the road.

"Now, the keys," came the next command. "We knows what's inside that box an' we aims to have it!' '

"Ain't got no keys," Zach returned promptly. "The box was locked before we left Deed City, an' it can't be unlocked until it reaches Oreana Wells. I don't carry the key to it."

Again the gun tilted in the bandit leader's hand as he glared at the old driver. Then he relaxed as he saw that Zach was speaking truth. "All right," he growled, "we can bust it open, I reckon. Yuh can be movin' on now, feller."

Zach looked down and back and saw that Tony, with the man guarding her,

was still standing in the road at the back of the coach. "Miss Alden ain't got in yet," Zach protested. "I'll be movin' just the minnit she's seated—"

"Yuh'll be movin' now!" came the savage interruption. "The gal ain't goin' with yuh!"

Zach looked stubborn. "Yuh better not try no abductin' business, mister—"

"Don Bandido, to you," the leader cut in. "Don't be misterin' me!"

The old driver looked at him in sudden amazement. "So you're Don Bandido, eh?" he said after a few moments. "Wal, all I've got to say is that you're a heap different than I thought yuh was. I never heard of the Don pullin' no such dirty tricks as warrin' on women—"

The gun in the leader's hand flamed suddenly—a small round hole appeared in the crown of Zach's sombrero!

"That's just a warnin'," the leader snarled. "Next time I'm shootin' to kill! Yuh better get movin'!"

Zach considered. He knew he stood no chance against three men, unarmed as he was. Sam Hardwin was still groggy and could give no help. Again Zach's eyes strayed to the three rifle-barrels protruding from the brush. He decided suddenly the best move was to get to Oreana Wells for help as soon as possible.

"You win, mister," he admitted reluctantly, refusing to give the other the title of Don. "I'll be movin' along."

"You're showin' a heap of good sense," came the short answer. "Now get outta here!"

Zach gathered up the reins, spoke to the horses, and the coach moved slowly around the bend in the trail. Then came the staccato pounding of horses' hoofs and the creak and rattle of the old vehicle as Zach threw the animals full speed ahead. It wasn't long before the rumble of the coach had died away in the distance.

The two men turned back to Tony and the man guarding her.

"I'll watch the gal," the leader ordered. "You fellers bust open that box, then we'll be movin'."

Tony made no attempt to escape while the men were pounding the iron lock with loose pieces of rock. She knew it would avail her nothing to try. The men would catch her—maybe shoot her—before she was fairly started. She stood silently by while the box was opened and the three sacks of gold removed. It contained nothing else except a packet of letters. These were left in the middle of the road with the lock-wrecked open box.

Then one of the men made his way into the brush at the side. In a minute he returned with three rifles and three sombreros. Tony understood now. The hats and guns had been arranged in such way as to give the appearance of men, ready to pull death-dealing triggers. It was all a trick—a trick that had completely fooled Zach Cortree. Had Zach dreamed that he had but three bandits to contend with, he would have put up a stiff fight.

"Pretty smart stunt, eh?" grinned the man who called himself Don Bandido.

Tony didn't answer at once. She looked steadily into the evil eyes that glittered through the slits in the bandanna mask, until the man turned away. "No, it's not so smart," Tony answered coldly at last. "It's just about what I'd expect from the snake-breed, though!"

"Aw-w-w! We'll take some of that freshness outta yuh, gal, when we gets to camp," the man sneered. He turned to the other two men who stood waiting. "All ready?"

"Ready," came the answer. "Yuh'll have to carry one of them sacks of money. We got our hands full."

The leader bent over and grabbed one of the sacks. Each of the other two men carried a sack, also. The rifles and sombreros were divided between them.

Pushing Tony on ahead, they made their way on foot in the direction taken by the coach. Once around the bend, the trail widened and fell away on either side in a long slope that stretched down to a maze of broken gullies, small canyons, coulees thickly covered with the various growths familiar to the Southwest.

Here they turned down the slope on the western side of the trail, Tony silently obeying the bandits' injunctions to "move lively!" Rounding a huge granite boulder

almost entirely hidden by chaparral, they came upon three horses all saddled and ready to move.

Tony was commanded to climb into one of the saddles, after which the leader tied her hands to the horn.

"Where are you taking me?" Tony asked. She was beginning to feel some trepidation now, but no fear showed in her dark eyes.

"That's for you to find out, gal," the leader answered. "Yuh'll learn right soon." With that he swung himself to the back of the second horse.

The other two bandits finished fastening the sacks of gold to saddles, then climbed to the back of the third horse. Then the three horses jogged off.

Tony tried to keep in mind the trail they were taking, but after the first mile or so, lost all track. Down through deep, narrow canyons they picked their way, up steep slopes, through tangled jungles of cactus and sage and mesquite. The sun dropped, purple dusk lingered but a few moments, then darkness descended.

Evidently the men knew where they were going, for there was no hesitation. To them it was an old trail, and no word was spoken that would give the girl any hint as to the destination. An hour they traveled in the dark. Tony could just dimly make out in the soft light of the low hanging stars, the forms of her captors; to her right, the leader of the bandits, while on her left was the horse carrying its double-burden. Sometime later the moon came up.

They were in timber now, the going all down grade. Tony guessed, and rightly, that they had crossed the mountains and were now in the western foothills of the San Alejo Range. That meant that Oreana Wells, where her uncle awaited her arrival, was but twelve or fifteen miles distant.

The thought gave her new hope. Even now Zach Cortree had arrived with the news, and it was more than probable that a searching party was out looking for her. And yet, she doubted that anyone, without knowing the way, could follow the trail taken by the bandits. Certainly they showed no haste as they would surely have done had they feared pursuit.

Abruptly they came upon an old cabin, sheltered among the trees and rocks. The lines of its peaked roof stood out sharply against the moon illumined sky. Here the horses were reined to a halt.

Tony, her hands bound to the saddle-horn, made no effort to dismount.

The leader of the bandits looked at her a moment. "Well, come on down," he ordered. "Yuh goin' to sit there all night? This here cabin'll be your home for a coupla days, so yuh might as well light an' look it over."

"I can't very well get out of the saddle when you have my hands tied this way," Tony retorted indignantly.

"Hell! I forgot that." Then a nasty chuckle as he reached up and released her hands. "If nothin' worse'n havin' your hands tied happens to yuh, yuh ain't got no kick comin'!"

CHAPTER III

Don Bandido

THE gold was carried into the cabin, then Tony's wrists were again bound, while two of the men set about getting something to eat. Some cold beans were produced, and a short time later a can of coffee was bubbling over the small fire of mesquite roots which burned just outside the cabin door.

While food was being prepared, the leader found a lantern in one corner of the shack. This he lighted and placed on a rough board table in the center of the single room.

The cabin was a rickety old place and, to all appearances, had been built some twenty or thirty years before. It was scantily furnished, having, in addition to the table, three straight-back chairs. Two straw-covered bunks stood at either end of the room. On one of these Tony was seated.

The floor of packed mud was bare of covering of any sort. The furnishings looked fairly new, which led the girl to believe that the outlaws had only recently taken up the occupancy of the cabin.

Tony found some slight hope in the fact that the men still retained their masks. This led her to believe that they were only holding her for ransom, and that they feared to be recognized should she again some day see them.

The bandits made no attempt to conceal their names now, though. The man known as Don Bandido was called Ed by his two companions. The other two were named Hank and Crowfoot Charlie. Their surnames weren't called into use.

In a short time the food and coffee were placed on the table and the men sat down to a session of noisy eating. No attention was paid to the girl until they had finished. Then, while Crowfoot Charlie and Hank were smoking, Ed brought her a plate of food and a tin cup filled with steaming coffee.

"We gotta keep yuh fattened up, gal," he jeered as he untied her wrists, "otherwise we won't get no kind of a price for yuh when we takes yuh across the Border. The spicks don't nohow like skinny women."

Tony's heart almost stopped beating. So that was the fate they held in store for her. She shuddered at the thought of being taken to some vile Mexican honky-tonk— However, the girl said nothing, but commenced to eat. The hot coffee revived her flagging spirits to some extent, and she began to wonder if she'd be able to make an escape. In that thought, though, Tony was doomed to disappointment. As soon as she'd finished eating, Ed again tied her hands; also, her ankles this time. Then he returned to the table and dropped down on a chair.

"Yuh figgerin' to push on to-night, Ed?" asked Crowfoot Charlie.

"Hell, no!" Ed replied. "It's too late." He stopped and hauled a cheap watch out of his pocket, scrutinized it a minute. "It's goin' on nine-thirty now. I'm stayin' here to-night. I can see the boss in the mornin'." Quite evidently Ed, or Don Bandido as he called himself, took orders from someone higher up.

A pack of greasy cards was produced, and for an hour the three men played for small stakes. Eventually this form of amusement palled. From somewhere in the cabin a jug of cheap whiskey was brought out and passed around the table, each man taking a long, noisy swig of the liquor. Instead of stopping there the jug again went the rounds—and again.

Tony watched the men with growing fear as they continued the steady drinking. Their voices grew louder, more boisterous. At times they turned their evil glances in the girl's direction. Tony felt her blood run cold each time this happened.

Finally Hank pulled the bandanna mask from his face, disclosing a set of rat-like features. "I'm tired of wearin' that damn' thing," he growled drunkenly.

"Hey, yuh blasted fool!" Ed roared. "Ain't yuh got no sense?"

"Aw-w-w! What's the odds?" Crowfoot Charlie protested. "The gal won't never get a chance to see us again." He, too, removed the mask, showing a broad round face—high cheekbones. Indian blood there, someplace.

Ed shrugged his shoulders, cast an uneasy glance at Tony, then gave in. He said something that had to do with it not making any difference anyway. A minute more and he, too, had shed the mask. He rose to his feet and staggered toward Tony. "Well, what do yuh think of your handsome pals now that yuh've seen 'em?" he leered.

The girl shuddered involuntarily, then looked up into his unshaven countenance, bleary eyes—tobacco juice dribbling from one corner of the repulsive flabby lips—

The thought of being at the mercy of these three was appalling, but Tony kept her nerve. "You'll never take any prizes at a beauty show," she answered steadily, "although in a prize hog contest the three of you ought to grade up high—a green ribbon, at least!"

The remark brought a howl of laughter from the two men at the table, but the leader scowled down at her. "Mebbe yuh won't be so cocky a few days from now," he growled threateningly. He left her side and moved unsteadily back to the table—reached for the jug.

It was sometime later that Hank got his idea. "Say, fellers, I was just think-

in' that white folks oughta come before greasers," he proposed meaningly.

The other two weren't slow to catch the drift of his thoughts. As one man they turned and appraised Tony as they might have some thoroughbred mare. The girl flinched before the look in their bloodshot eyes. An icy hand seemed to clutch at her pounding heart.

A heavy silence ensued as the men slowly withdrew from the girl and sought each other's face.

"You're meanin'," Ed spoke at last, his voice coming thickly through the liquor fumes, "that the gal ought to belong to us —first?"

"Nothin' wrong with that idea," Crowfoot Charlie laughed maudlinly. "I reckon as how I'm the handsomest feller here that—"

"You're reckonin' nothin' of the kind," Ed broke in savagely. "I'm headin' this game, an' what I says goes—"

"Not in this case it don't," Hank denied. "It was my idea in the first place—"

Ed glared at his two companions, but they refused to be faced down. The alcohol gave them a courage they wouldn't have had at another time. He relaxed suddenly. "I'll tell yuh what we'll do. We'll cut the cards to see who gets this female! High man wins an' the others keep hands off. How about it?"

After a few minutes of noisy, useless bickering, Crowfoot Charlie and Hank agreed to the proposition. The cards were again produced and the men gathered about the table.

Tony watched them, her eyes now wide with fright. She strained at her bonds, but accomplished nothing. Cold, stark fear had her in its grasp now. Her eyes roved wildly about the room. The lantern cast huge shadows of the men against the bare cabin walls. Something beastly there in the black distorted shapes. The girl felt her senses slipping, but managed somehow to retain a slim hold on herself. Everything in a sort of dark haze now—

Tony watched as though fascinated while Ed's dirt-caked hand moved toward the cards in the center of the table. He picked a small bunch of cards off the top of the deck, slowly turned them face upward. Like vultures the other two bent nearer to see—

A sudden lurid stream of profanity was torn from Crowfoot Charlie's lips. Dully, Ed's harsh laugh reached Tony's ears, then his words, "King of Spades! Yuh got somethin' to beat, waddies!"

"This draw ain't over yet," Hank gritted.

Tony, with an effort, tore her eyes from the scene. It was unthinkable that these men should be cutting cards for her as they might for some animal—

The three bandits, their backs to the open door, failed to see the man who had appeared silently in the entrance and stood watching the proceedings. They were too engrossed in their own fiendish game to take notice of anything else.

Tony happened to glance up; her eyes fell on the newcomer. With difficulty she stifled the sudden cry that rose in her throat. How long he'd been standing there she didn't know. He was a tall, rangy individual in riding boots, gray trousers, and flannel shirt. He leaned carelessly against one side of the doorway, smoking a cigarette, one thumb hooked loosely in his cartridge belt. Folded over his left shoulder was draped a vivid red serape, edged with black. A gun hung low at the man's right hip. Covering his raven-black hair was a high-crowned Mexican sombrero of soft gray beaver.

Even in the stress of the moment, Tony gathered that he was undeniably good-looking—nose slightly aquiline, the jaw lean and square. The firm even lips were curved slightly in a smile of tolerant amusement. His gray eyes weren't smiling, though. They were cold, hard—blazing lights in them like small pin-points of chilled steel—

The wave of hope that had swept through Tony at first sight of the stranger, suddenly died out. Even if he were a friend, what could he do against three such beasts as were gambling for her—for her very life as a matter of fact!

The man felt her eyes on him and for a brief moment shifted his gaze to meet hers. Momentarily his eyes softened.

Tony caught the flash of even white teeth, then again he centered his attention on the three men at the table.

The girl caught a certain strength from the look he had given her. There was a lift in her that she hadn't known before, as though a great weight had suddenly been removed from her body. No question about it now; the man was here to help. Her eyes moved back to the table.

A sudden curse from Hank broke the silence as he slammed a handful of cards on the table and reached for the jug of whisky.

"Reckon I can beat a diamond deuce," Crowfoot Charlie grunted, speaking of Hank's draw.

"Yuh better give it up, Crowfoot," Ed advised. "I as good as got yuh licked now."

The man at the door stirred, spoke easily. "I'm declarin' myself in on the cut, fellers!"

At his voice the three whirled, hands darting to holsters. Before they could draw, they found themselves looking into a gun, held steadily by the man in the red serape. The move had been lightning fast—all the grace of a woman in that swift upflash of blue steel weapon.

"I wouldn't try it if I was you," the warning came in the soft tones of the newcomer. Something deadly about it, at that.

The three bandits shrank back, slowly releasing fingers about their gun-butts. Something of mixed fear and consternation was in the wide-eyed gaze they leveled at the man in the doorway.

Ed was first to find his voice. "Don—Don Bandido!" he gasped.

"You're right, Don Bandido," came the answer. "But, this time the *real* Don Bandido, Ed Masters!—Shucks! Yuh don't need to look as if yuh didn't know what I was talkin' about." Again a trace of amusement crept into his manner. "I heard all about yuh plannin' to hold up the stage under my name, so's I'd get the blame for it. One of my men heard your boss layin' plans. You Arrow-M snakes is goin' to get caught in a hemp-loop yet, if yuh don't watch your step!"

Ed Masters laughed confidently. "Yuh gotta nerve tellin' *us* what we should do. If I had as many folks huntin' me as you have, I'd be clearin' out of the country plenty *pronto*." Realizing that Don Bandido was alone, Ed Masters was regaining his nerve.

"That's neither here nor there," Don Bandido laughed coolly. "I announced a few minutes ago that I was declarin' myself in on this cut. That statement stands!"

Tony's heart dropped. After all she couldn't expect much help from a man who appeared to have no more morals than her captors.

"Yuh got plenty cheek, you have," Hank sneered, taking the cue from his leader. "What yuh got to say about it? If yuh think yuh got any rights that entitles yuh in the drawin' for this yearlin', I craves to hear about 'em!"

"The rights I got," Don Bandido stated, "adds up to five." The gun in his hand tilted a trifle. "They're all in the cylinder of my smoke-wagon!—Now am I in on this, or ain't I?" The ominous click of his Colt's hammer completed the sentence.

For a moment the three men stared, without speaking, at the unwavering six-shooter in Don Bandido's hand.

Gradually it dawned on Hank and Crowfoot Charlie that another draw wouldn't be a bad idea. So far all the advantage lay with Ed Masters. Later the Don could be settled some other way.

Crowfoot Charlie spoke first. "Far's I'm concerned yuh can come in on it," he agreed, although somewhat sullenly.

Hank thought suddenly of the deuce of diamonds he'd drawn. Another draw couldn't result in anything worse. At the same time his chances might be improved. "I'm trailin' with Crowfoot," he said, casting a defiant glance at Masters.

Ed Masters' face flamed with sudden rage as he saw the winning that he'd been so sure of, slipping from his grasp. "You fellers gimme a pain," he rasped. Then turning to Don Bandido. "I can't see nohow why yuh should be entitled to a hand in this layout—"

"That," the Don swiftly cut in, "I've al-

ready explained takes the form of five .45 slugs— Do yuh crave to see 'em?" His voice took on a mocking quality. "Why shouldn't I be in on anything that goes on around here? You fellers don't seem to realize that you're cuttin' in on my game. If I'm to get the blame for this job, I figger to get my cut. That's only square. Shucks! Masters, ain't yuh takin' no stock in that old sayin' that there's honor among thieves?"

Masters lost his temper at that. A vile oath expressed his sentiments in no uncertain manner.

Again the Don's gun came up. "That'll do, Masters," he ordered quietly, a cold hard light flashing from the gray eyes.

Masters, suddenly subdued, backed down from that look. "All right," he gave in, in a low mutter, "have it your own way."

"That's what I been intendin' to do from the first," Don Bandido answered. "I'm glad to see you're takin' your defeat graceful. I didn't want to call my men unless I had to—"

"Your *what?*" The three bandits looked up in sudden astonishment, as Ed Masters asked the question.

Again a soft laugh of amusement from Don Bandido. "My gang," he answered, "if yuh know what I mean. I got ten-eleven men within call." A scornful note entered his voice. "Do yuh think I'd be fool enough to come here alone?"

Masters and his two companions had no answer for this.

Don Bandido holstered his gun and moved easily toward the table. "All right, fellers, let's get this cuttin' over with." Taking a last long "drag" on the cigarette, he removed it from his lips and nonchalantly stuffed the smoking butt in the open pocket of Crowfoot Charlie's shirt.

Crowfoot moved suddenly with some excitement, managed to extract the cigarette and throw it on the floor, but not without burning his fingers. "Damn it!" he raged. "What yuh tryin' to do, Don?"

Tony noticed the boyish glee on the Don's lips when he grinned. "Gosh, Crowfoot," he chuckled, "can't yuh take a joke? You fellers won't ever make first-class bandits. Yuh take life too serious!" Turning away, he reached over and picked up the scattered cards.

It was the contempt in the Don's manner and the easy familiarity with which he treated the three, that put it across. Already he held the superior position, for the bandits didn't know at what moment he might call to his men.

Except for that first smile, the Don had paid no attention to Tony. For all the notice the girl had received from him she might not have been there. Although Tony didn't realize it, Don Bandido was concentrating every sense on the three outlaws—watching for the first sign of treachery.

While he shuffled the cards, the Don kept up a running fire of comment. "We might as well have a new draw all around —A lotta nerve you got, Hank, with that face of yours, a-tryin' to make a hit with a pretty girl," he laughed, the cards riffling in his hands with a smooth dexterity born of much practice. Or, "Crowfoot, I gotta hunch you're goin' to be low man on this cuttin' business." And again, "Ed, I'll give yuh a nickel for your chance. At that I'd be losin' money!"

"Shuffle the cards an' don't talk so much," Ed Masters growled.

"Gettin' on your nerves, eh?" the Don smiled sarcastically. "Must be yuh've heard about my luck. It's sure enough goin' to be hard for yuh—losin' the girl an' the money both!"

"What do yuh mean—the money?" Masters asked suspiciously.

"Yuh know what I mean, all right," the Don answered. "The money yuh took off the stage this afternoon. Somethin' over eighteen thousand berries, ain't it? Well, I've decided that the man that wins the girl, takes the cash, too!" His eyes swept the three men with a hard glance. "Anybody got any objections?"

Objections there were, but they remained unvoiced.

At last the cards were shuffled, and he placed them on the table. "One cut, high card takes the prize," he announced. "You first, Masters.

Masters' hand trembled as he reached toward the deck.

Tony, watching while the cuts were made, noted the tense looks on the men's faces. Only Don Bandido's features were free from strain as Masters turned over a card.

"Ten of Clubs!" the Don announced. "That won't be so hard to beat. Go ahead, Crowfoot!"

Tony didn't see Crowfoot Charlie draw, but she caught the oath with which he slammed down the cards, then the Don's voice, "Told yuh yuh was goin' to be low man, Crowfoot. Deuce of Spades puts yuh outta the runnin'."

Don put out his hand and shoved the cards toward Hank. "So far yuh got a ten to beat, Hank."

Tony's heart skipped a beat when the announcement came: "King o' Clubs!"

A low laugh from Hank, and Tony felt, rather than saw, the leering light of possession already gleaming in his eyes.

The girl knew now that she wanted Don Bandido to win her. Why, she couldn't explain. He was a bandit like the others—no better, no worse! No better?—She checked herself on that thought. There was that about the man, despite the fact he was a violator of laws, that appealed to something deep in her being.

She could scarcely breathe as the Don's hand stretched forth to the cards. It was the last draw. Everything depended on what card that hand turned over. Even then, Tony noticed that it was a fine hand —slim, tanned, sensitive fingers with something of a magnetic quality about them. Mostly, she noted that the nails were trimmed and *clean*.

It was so quiet in the cabin now that the slightest noise would have sounded like a clap of thunder. Slowly, slowly, Don Bandido turned over his card. Then the girl heard the low sigh of relief that issued from his lips.

"The Ace of Hearts does it," came his steady voice. "I win!"

Quite suddenly Tony's eyes were moist, and she realized she'd been holding her breath.

CHAPTER IV

"Take Me With You"

FOR a few moments the tension in the small room was terrible. Something of the absolute silence that precedes a mighty setting-off off high explosives, was there. Everything at a standstill, the four men facing each other with all the immobility of statues graven from living marble. The girl tense, her face, luminous white, standing out clearly in the half-shadow, half-light from the flickering lantern.

As in a dream, Tony watched the tableau about the table. Three men, their features contorted with hate, eyeing savagely a forth who stood still, holding for their inspection an Ace of Hearts. The fate of a girl and three sacks of gold decided on the turn of a small bit of pasteboard. Heavy breathing from the three men who had lost, now—from the fourth, a faint contemptuous smile. Over all, the smoke of cigarettes and reek of liquor—

An insect buzzed faintly against the chimney of the lighted lantern. At the sound the defeated outlaws started nervously. Through the silence came Don Bandido's laugh as he slowly let the cards slip out of his hand to the table.

"Not a bad piece of work," he chuckled. "My luck's still holdin' good."

No answer from the three outlaws. A half-unconscious lowering of hands at this point—

The Don appeared not to notice this. "I'll be goin' now," he informed them. Something in the tones stopped that motion toward holsters. "Untie the girl, Crowfoot. Hank, you drag them sacks of gold over to the door. I'm askin' that you both move lively!"

Still the soft tones—almost a purring quality in the voice now, but still words that demanded obedience. Ed Masters' legs bent uncertainly to a chair at the table while the other two outlaws moved to carry out the Don's orders. Don Bandido swung easily around that he might keep all three men before him at the same time. He was more than ever on the alert now.

Tony rose somewhat stiffly to her feet

as Crowfoot Charlie released the knots that bound her numbed wrists and ankles. Don Bandido spoke shortly to her. "They's saddles outside the door. Saddle one of the horses for yourself. Carry out these sacks. Put 'em on my horse. Yuh'll find him just outside."

"But—" Tony commenced.

"Do as I tell yuh," the Don ordered in curt tones. "I won yuh! You're goin' with me!"

Even Tony had fallen under the spell of his voice. She was too dazed to remonstrate further. Picking up two of the sacks, she staggered through the door.

Once outside, she was tempted to mount Don Bandido's horse and ride away. Something of submission in her breast prevented that, something she couldn't quite understand. Instead she fastened the sacks of gold to the saddle, then threw Masters' saddle over one of the outlaws' horses picketed nearby. In a few minutes she returned and procured the third sack, carried it to the Don's horse.

When all was ready, Tony returned to the cabin. The Don was standing in the doorway, facing the three bandits. Ed Masters was still seated, Hank and Crowfoot Charlie standing behind him. Tony trembled as she noted the savage ferocity on their faces—fear there, too. Probably the latter was holding the three in check.

So silently had Tony entered that Don, his eyes on the outlaws, didn't know she'd returned until he felt a tug at his sleeve.

"All set to leave?" he inquired without looking at her.

"All—set," she faltered.

He nodded. "We'll be sayin' good-night, then, hombres," the Don commenced. "I'm advisin' that yuh don't cross my trail again—"

That was as far as he got. With an animal-like howl of rage, Ed Masters leaped to his feet, hand at gun! "By Gawd!" he almost screamed. "I ain't lettin' yuh get away with nothin' like that—"

Tony didn't see what happened. With one move of his left arm Don Bandido swept her behind him where she was screen by the red serape that hung from his shoulder. His right hand reached to the six-shooter at his hip.

From Masters' gun came a stream of fire. A bullet slashed through the red serape and on out into the night. Then came three reports close at hand. Stumbling footsteps—an agonized cry—the crashing thud of a falling body—metallic drumming of spur chains. Silence. A pain-wrenched oath from near the table broke the quiet. With a feeling of thankfulness Tony realized that Don was still on his feet.

When next she looked the room was blue with drifting smoke—an acrid odor of burnt powder in her nostrils. Ed Masters was sprawled face-down almost at her feet, a smoking gun still clutched in his lifeless fingers. Back of the table stood Hank, hands raised high in air. Crowfoot Charlie was half-draped over the back of a chair, a deep crimson stain spreading over one shoulder.

"Yuh showed good sense in not drawin', Hank," Don Bandido was saying coolly. "I'm advisin' that you an' Crowfoot move outta the country *pronto!* I won't let yuh off so easy next time. Masters won't move any place—*no more!*" Then to the girl, "Into the saddle. We're movin'!"

Tony didn't wait to hear more. She ran from the cabin and mounted one of the two horses that stood waiting in the darkness. From the cabin came Don Bandido's final words. "Don't try followin' us, Hank. It wouldn't be healthy! *Adios!*"

Tony's horse was already in motion when he backed from the door, gun still covering the occupants of the cabin. In another minute he had turned, run swiftly to the horse she was leading away, and leaped to its back.

No word was spoken; he took the lead and she followed. Fears for her own safety were forgotten as the horses pounded on. Something of a new freedom throbbed in Tony's breast as she felt the surge of the galloping horse beneath her. What it all meant she wasn't certain. She only knew that she felt strongly attached to this man, outlaw that he was,

who had won her on the turn of a card. And yet, he'd shown her no special consideration. Except for that first smile when he arrived at the cabin, he had treated her little better than Ed Masters and his two henchmen. His tones had carried no especial friendliness. Something different about the look in his eyes, though. A few minutes later she remembered how he had shielded her with his body when the shooting commenced. At least, he knew how to protect his woman.

An abrupt cessation of thought there, something of panic fluttering in Tony's breast. Already she was taking it for granted that he had actually won her, that she really belonged to this silent man who rode at her side. Perhaps it was some primitive urge that prompted the feeling, but the fact was that Tony wasn't doing a great deal of worrying on that point.

At times Don Bandido slowed pace as the horses threaded their way through patches of timber, then, once again in the open country, they tore on. The moon was tipping over toward the west now, but overhead the velvet-black void was still frosted with a chaotic glimmering.

Tony called for a stop once. She had saddled hastily and now the rig was slipping. As he dismounted to tighten her cinch, a chill early morning breeze enveloped the two. Tony shivered slightly, but said nothing. She didn't think he'd noticed, but before they started on, Don Bandido removed his red serape and wound it about the girl's shoulders. Tony was grateful for its woolly warmth as she sank her chin into its soft folds. She started to thank him, but with a gesture he cut her off and remounted, after helping her into the saddle. Again the two horses got under way.

It must have been after three in the morning when they halted at the side of a tiny stream trickling down from the foothills. She watched in silence while he removed the saddles from their mounts and picketed the horses a short distance away. Camp was made and in a few minutes Don Bandido had a can of coffee bubbling over a small bed of coals.

There were some apologies from the man because he couldn't produce beans and bacon. "Yuh see," he explained shortly, "I 'most always travel pretty light." Then a touch of grim laughter, "Folks keep me on the move, yuh know."

Tony nodded. It wasn't necessary for the Don to explain.

A few minutes later he had spread his blankets near the fire. "Yuh can get a few minutes sleep before mornin'. You're safe now. I'll be close by should yuh want me."

With that he started toward the circle of darkness that surrounded the camp. Tony stopped him with a word.

He swung around at her voice. "Well?"

"But, wait," she insisted, from her seat on the blankets, "you haven't told me where we're going." Then the correction, "—where you're taking me."

Surprise in his tones now. "Why—to Oreana Wells, of course. That's where the stage was takin' yuh."

It was a bit too much for Tony. "I thought," she faltered, "—well, something else. The cards, you know—" Her voice trailed off into silence. The thought occurred to her that she was a bit disappointed in his answer, for some reason.

Don Bandido's white teeth flashed in a warm smile. He returned and dropped down on the ground a short distance from her. "I reckon mebbe I shoulda explained before this," he answered slowly. There was a soft drawling quality in his voice. "'Nother thing: mebbe I should do some apologizin' for treatin' yuh so short in the cabin back there. Yuh see, I had to play a part. I kinda thought mebbe them skunks wouldn't make no fuss if they thought I was really playin' their own game—takin' yuh away for myself."

Things were coming clearer to Tony now. "But how did you know I was there?" she asked.

"I'll commence at the beginning," he replied. "One of my men overheard the plans bein' made to hold up the stage in my name—they's a lot of hold-ups pulled these days that same way. I ain't to blame for all of 'em. Anyway, I tried to get there in time to prevent it, but I was

too late. I was up on a high bluff when it happened an' saw the whole affair through my field-glasses. It took me some time to get down to the road where the hold-up was pulled, an' by that time yuh'd been gone an hour or more. Then I had to follow your trail. 'Course I couldn't make such good time as you did. That's why I arrived some time later. That cabin was well hid."

"Why did you follow us in the first place?" Tony wanted to know.

"Because," he answered frankly, "I wanted that gold."

Something of scorn in the girl's next words. "I was a secondary consideration, of course. I wonder now why you didn't just take the gold and leave me there."

The man swung around, looked squarely into her eyes. Tony was first to look away. There was no resentment in his next words. He spoke softly, "I forgot the gold when I saw you. Nothing else mattered right then."

"Oh!" Only the one word from the girl. Her head was still bent, eyes gazing into the glowing embers of the fire.

"Yuh see," Don Bandido continued, "from where I was lookin' at the hold-up I couldn't tell yuh was a girl—especially with that double-barreled skirt on. Yuh got a free an' easy swing like a man—"

"I expected to leave Oreana Wells by horse," Tony explained, again finding her voice. "That's why I wore riding togs."

The man nodded. "I imagine Masters an' them other two was as surprised to find a girl as I was—"

"And yet," Tony broke in, "you took the gold, too."

Don Bandido laughed shortly. "Provin'," he answered, "that I ain't so bad as some folks paints me. That gold is goin' to be returned to the express company!"

Tony was slow to get that. "I don't quite understand."

"I'll explain a few things—" He interrupted himself to say, "I wonder did yuh ever hear of a feller named Hawk Larsen?"

Tony nodded her head. "Yes, I met him last summer when I was down this way. I didn't like him."

"That's somethin' we agree on," the Don answered dryly. "Well, Larsen was havin' that gold shipped to him. Then he fixed it up to have his own men steal it—Ed Masters, his foreman, Crowfoot Charlie, Hank—"

"Why should Larsen want his own money stolen?"

"So he could double it! Yuh see, the Express Company would have to make it good. Except for the small amounts Larsen would have to pay his three men, he'd nearly double his money. As I mentioned before, one of my men overheard Larsen making plans. I set out to spoil them. Masters an' them other two was to have two other fellers to help 'em. I run into 'em a few miles this side of Deed City. If I remember correct—" a bit of a laugh here "—we threw some lead at each other."

"And you killed one of them," Tony accused.

Don looked at her with some surprise. "I what—?"

Tony explained about the wounded man riding into Deed City, just before the coach pulled out. "He said that you rode into camp, opened fire without warning and killed his pal. After that, your men ran off the herd," she finished.

Don Bandido considered this a moment. "That hombre was sure triflin' with the truth, then," he said at last. "Now listen to my story. In the first place there wasn't any herd of cattle. Those two fellers were riding to meet Ed Masters an' help him with the hold-up. They'd made a trip to Deed City to arrange about having Larsen's gold shipped through. That's how they happened to be so far from Oreana Wells. Their camp was pretty well surrounded with brush, and I got right close to 'em and listened to their conversation. When they were through talking, I walked into the camp and warned them out of the country. Both of 'em pulled guns—an' both missed me! I plugged one in the shoulder an' t'other in the leg. It was nat'ral for that feller to ride into Deed City for help. Then he cooked up the whole story to raise feeling against me."

Don broke off a moment to roll a cigarette. When it was lighted, he resumed. "Folks are so ready to believe anythin' of me these days, that they never stop to think," he said bitterly. "You was abducted to work up feelin' against me—partly. Leastwise they knew I'd be blamed for it. Nope, I didn't kill that feller, nor did I run off any cattle. None of my men were with me. I ain't never killed a man yet." Then he amended his statement, "That is, until to-night—I guess it's last night now."

"You mean Masters?" she asked. And when Don Bandido had answered in the affirmative, "But why did you kill him? You say you've gotten out of scrapes before without killing."

"This was different," he replied slowly. "I couldn't take a chance on just disablin' him. I had to stop Masters sudden. If I'd been alone it wouldn't have bothered me, but I had to look out for—"

Tony laughed nervously. "I'm slow at understanding to-night."

"Why, don't you see, girl, Masters was crazy-mad at losin' yuh. It was *you* he was firin' at! He didn't want me to have yuh if he couldn't." A pause, then, "It was necessary to kill, an' while I'm regrettin' it, I'd do it again under the same circumstances."

"You mean," the girl inquired in a low voice, "that you'd be willing to kill again for me?"

A second time that long steady look from gray eyes. "I'd do more than that," he replied quietly. "I'd die for you."

It was disconcerting the way he'd come out with remarks like that when Tony was least expecting it. To cover her embarrassment the girl took a fresh tack. "And yet," she persisted, "you were willing to risk losing me on the turn of a card."

Words to explain that were difficult to locate. "I know it looks that way to you," the Don answered, nodding his head, "but I knew my luck was working. It's hard to make you see it, but I felt that anything I was doin' for you couldn't pan out wrong. Yuh see, there was some sort of force there, coming from you to me, as if you was helpin'—" He broke off, shaking his head, puzzled. "It won't come clear," he finished simply, "but I just knew we couldn't lose, that's all."

Tony comprehended his meaning without being able to put it into concrete words. "I think I know what you mean," she admitted slowly, "but just suppose—suppose Masters, or one of the others, had drawn that high card? Would you have gone away and left me?"

The girl wasn't quite ready for the strength of his next words when they came. He didn't answer her question directly for a few minutes. "I've been wonderin'," he replied, his voice vibrant with feeling and the rich intensity of the moment, "whether I'll ever leave yuh. Bein' here alone with yuh, an' all quiet like it is, with the stars hangin' so close yuh can almost touch 'em, an' the firelight shinin' on your hair—well, it all kinda makes me forget what I am and what you are—" He broke off suddenly, then resumed in a more matter-of-fact voice, "Why, if the cards had played me false, I'd have found some other way of takin' you away from them coyotes."

His last words brought Tony back to normal again. "You'd have called in your men, of course."

"My men? Oh, yes—" He laughed softly. "I'd forgotten that. Yuh see, I didn't have any men with me. That was just bluff!"

Tony was realizing more all the time the risk he had run for her sake. For a few minutes the two were silent. Finally she asked, "If you know that hold-up was planned by Hawk Larsen, why don't you—"

The laugh that interrupted her sentence carried a hint of harshness. "Why don't I tell the authorities, eh?" he finished for her. "Don't you realize, girl, that I wouldn't be believed? It would be only the word of Don—Don Bandido against Hawk Larsen's. Folks aren't putting any faith in the word of a common outlaw," he finished bitterly.

"And are you a common outlaw?" the girl asked softly.

Again that note of harshness in his speech. "People say I am. I guess pretty

near every sheriff in the county is tryin' to collect that reward that's offered for my capture—"

"But why?" she broke in.

His voice rose a little now. "Why? Because I've been branded as a common thief. Maybe I am, accordin' to law. I've stolen money from Hawk Larsen more'n once, my men have rustled Arrow-M cattle—" His face darkened. "I'll do it again, too, pro'bly." Something in the girl's face caused him to pause. "Oh, don't think it's easy, this bein' hunted night and day, never knowing when you're goin' to receive a shot in the back; never getting a full night's sleep without the fear hanging over you that the dawn may bring a sheriff and his posse; never to be able to enter a town without a hand on your gun; never to be able to take a white man by the hand and call him friend. The Mexicans are good. Every one of my men would die for me if he had to, but—after all, they're not my kind, loyal as they are. Yuh'll find a heap of people that think they's somethin' romantic 'bout this bandit business, but I'm tellin' yuh, anybody that says that, don't know nothin' about it!" Words and thoughts, long pent up, had burst forth in a torrential flow that Don Bandido found hard to stop.

He got suddenly to his feet, laughed a bit sheepishly. "I've said too much. Indulgin' in self-pity is gettin' to be a habit with me lately. Just forget what I've told yuh. I'm only Don Bandido, outlaw with a price on his head." Something whimsical in his voice now, "Do you know, I'm havin' a hard time rememberin' that myself—with you sittin' here—just like we was old friends—"

Tony, too, had gained her feet and stood facing him. Conventions, friends, family, everything was forgotten in the wave of pity that rushed over her.

There was no reason behind her next remark. "I think," she said in a small voice that just reached him, "that we're more than friends—Wasn't that proved when you cut the Ace of Hearts?"

The man was slow to get her meaning. "I'm not understandin'," he frowned at last.

Tony raised her eyes to meet his. "There isn't much to understand," she answered bravely. "You won the gold—and the girl. I'm yours— Take me with you—"

It was difficult for him to realize she was keeping the bargain, a bargain not of her own making. For a moment words wouldn't come. The Don took Tony's face in his hands, looked long into the dark eyes. This time there was no turning away.

He stepped back suddenly, rough tones covering his emotion. "Yuh don't need to do anythin' like that. I ain't askin' for pay—for savin' yuh back in that cabin—"

Something of impatience in the girl's manner now. "That has nothing to do with it. Can't you—won't you see? I'm willing to go with you—always—share your life and your dangers. Don't make me say more—"

They were close now, the man's arms lifting to her. His head dropped lower to meet the face raised to his. Quite suddenly he released the girl and stepped back. His voice was unsteady, broke a little in the pauses. "It can't be," he said slowly. "The night is playin' tricks with yuh—like it was with me. Things'll look different in the daylight. Yuh're tired out—"

Her face was like a white lily in the dim light, something of child-like faith in the dark eyes. The man couldn't trust himself to say more. Turning, he strode off and was lost in the darkness.

Tony dropped weakly down on the blankets, gazing after him, wide-eyed. Then a wave of fatigue engulfed her and she curled up to sleep.

Dawn was blazing in the eastern sky when a movement near the fire awakened her. The girl opened her eyes to find Don feeding small greasewood twigs to the flames under the coffee. It seemed ages since she had talked to him. Tony wasn't forgetting her words of the night; only putting them away for future reference.

She lay quiet for a moment without moving, and took in her surroundings. They were in a small hollow, the encircling slopes studded with tall pines. A

short distance away rippled a small stream. Tony sniffed the coffee and sat up. At her movement Don swung around like a flash, hand dropping to holster. Then he smiled sheepishly. "Kinda close to town an' it makes a feller plumb spooky. Didn't expect you to wake so soon, after bein' up most of the night. There's the stream if yuh want to wash up." He turned back to the fire while she crawled from the blankets and made her way from the camp.

By the time Tony returned Don had a tin cup of coffee for her. From his saddle bags he produced a pair of dry biscuits. "Overlooked 'em last night," he commented. "Mebbe they're too hard to eat by now."

"I'm so hungry I could eat anything that didn't bite me first," Tony laughed, sinking her teeth into a biscuit. The coffee was good, too.

While she was having breakfast Don Bandido busied himself about the horses. This time the sacks of money were thrown on the horse Tony was to ride.

She rose from the side of the fire and came toward him. The early morning breeze was still a bit chilly, and she had the Don's red serape wrapped about her, one loose end draped across her breast and thrown back over the right shoulder. The Don glanced up and caught his breath a little at the picture she presented. Then he returned to the fire and stamped it out.

A few minutes later they were in the saddle. As they topped the first rise, Tony saw the town of Oreana Wells spread out not two miles distant.

"Oh, I didn't know we were so near to town," the girl said.

Don misunderstood her meaning. "Yeah, it ain't far now. I'd have taken yuh in last night, only I didn't want to leave yuh alone at night—'specially with all that gold."

Tony laughed softly. "Oh, I didn't mean that. I realized it wouldn't be safe for you to enter Oreana Wells. You see, I rather enjoyed myself last night. It isn't often one gets an opportunity to camp out with a real live bandit."

The man's lips parted in a smile, but there was little of mirth there. He seemed determined not to go back to the understanding of the night before, nor to mention it in any way.

They were riding easily, side by side. Occasionally their stirrups touched, and each time this happened Don Bandido swung his horse to one side. A tight rein on the emotions there.

A half mile east of town they drew rein. The country was flooded with golden sunshine now. It was a bit too early for the heat to be uncomfortable.

"Yuh know the town," the Don was saying, "so they ain't no use of me givin' yuh any instructions along that line. Just take that money to Frank Halverson. Yuh'll find Frank in the Oreana Wells House. He's the proprietor of the hotel. Square-shootin' hombre, too. He'll take care of the gold an' see that yuh get to—say, where you headin' for, anyway? I never thought to ask you. Just knew yuh was goin' to Oreana Wells."

The girl's eyes sparkled. "Weren't even interested enough to ask my name, were you?"

"I was too busy thinkin' of other things," Don answered meaningly. "Besides—besides, I don't know as it would do any good. We won't see each other again pro'bly." His eyes were miserable as he spoke the words.

The girl stretched out her gloved hand and touched his. "I don't know what's to prevent," she answered. "You won't be an outlaw all your life."

"That's somethin' I already give up," he answered, "ever since—last night. I'm afraid it won't help none, though. They's a heap of charges against me."

Tony tightened the grip on his hand. "Listen, Don," she said softly, "tell me something. Are you, or are you not, guilty of those charges?"

Don raised his head to meet her eyes. A long breath, then, "Not guilty—except where Hawk Larsen's concerned."

Tony nodded with satisfaction. "Just about what I thought. As to Hawk Larsen's part—well, I'm not worrying about that now. I think there's something be-

tween you and Larsen that hasn't been explained. When you feel like talking, I'll listen. When that time comes you'll find me at the Double-A Ranch."

"The Double-A?" he repeated quickly.

"Yes, Sheriff Art Alden's spread. I'm his niece, Tony Alden—Tony is short for Antoinette."

"Good Lord!" he gasped, then broke out laughing. "Here's the sheriff been huntin' me for the past year—an' I been entertainin' his niece all night!"

Tony joined in his laughter. "And from what I know of Uncle Art," she said, "he'll be mad as a wet hen! But he'll get over it when I tell him about you—" She broke off suddenly, then, "I'd forgotten I was wearing your serape—"

"Keep it," Don answered lightly, "it'll give me an excuse to call."

"You will call?" the girl asked seriously.

"They's nothing could keep me away now," he answered softly.

"That's a promise?" Her voice shook a trifle.

"It's a promise—Tony." His lips were smiling, but the gray eyes were grave.

The girl stripped off her glove—her hand went out to him. Then she felt his lips pressed into her soft palm. Suddenly his bowed head blurred before her eyes—

No further words were spoken as she put spurs to the horse and moved away in the direction of Oreana Wells.

Just before she entered town, Tony looked back. He was still sitting as she had left him, his slim figure silhouetted against the morning sun. The temptation to turn back was strong, but she kept going, knowing he would want it so.

CHAPTER V

Don Interferes

SATURDAY night in Oreana Wells; also, the first of the month. Pay-night. The main, wagon-rutted street teeming with humanity. Loud voices—occasional shots—blazing lights from saloons and honkytonks. An almost unbroken line of hitch-racks and tethered cowponies from one end of town to the other. Punchers, Mexicans, miners streamed back and forth, in and out of buildings. Some made their way across the tracks to the Mexican section of town where a small group of yellow-squared 'dobe buildings had become infected with the spirit of revelry. In short, Oreana Wells running wide open. A decent enough town, neither better nor worse than the typical cow towns when Judge Colt dispensed considerable of the law, sometimes backed up by that equally violent adjuster of real or fancied wrongs, Judge Lynch.

The Spotted Cayuse Saloon this night, as always, was getting its full share of the trade. Two perspiring bartenders worked feverishly to supply the thirsty demands of their patrons, lined two and three deep at the long mahogany bar.

Monte Morrell and Tige Kelly, two of Sheriff Art Alden's Double-A punchers, made part of the crowd. Both were of the sinewy-jawed, clean-cut type of American cowboy. It was second-drink time. While they were ordering, the two were joined by a third man, Cal Howden, another of Alden's men. Cal was red-headed and thinner than boarding-house soup. His six-foot-three augmented his lath-like appearance. Nothing fragile there, though; Cal was all muscle and bone, something of a whipcord quality about the elongated form.

"H'are yuh, cowboy?" Monte greeted. Tige voiced something similar.

"Thirsty," Cal drawled, shaking hands with them. "When'd you two hit town?"

" 'Bout fifteen minutes ago," from Tige.

Monte was trying to catch the bartender's eye. He succeeded. Business of drinking for several minutes.

"Any luck?" Tige wanted to know.

Cal spilled some Durham into a paper, twisted and lighted it. "If yuh mean by 'luck' did I have a good week's loafin' across the Border, I'll tell yuh 'yes,' but if yuh mean did I find Don Bandido, the answer's 'no'."

"If yuh ask me," Tige commented, "I'd say nobody'll catch the Don until he's ready to let'm. That boy's plumb slippery. A *buen hombre,* too, I'd say, after the way he treated Miss Tony."

"Nothin' else," agreed Cal. "I kinda felt that day Alden deputized me an' sent me on his trail that I was just wastin' time. I doubt if he headed for the Border after he left Miss Tony. I told Alden that, too. The Don's trail wasn't more'n four or five hours cold when I picked it up near where they'd camped that night, but, shucks! I hadn't followed it more'n five or six miles before it disappeared. Oh, well, I shouldn't kick. A week's vacation ain't to be sniffed at."

"Plumb funny," grunted Monte, "how the sheriff always picks you when he wants some trailin' done. I kinda crave to get in on one of these lay-offs myself once in a while."

"Nothin' funny about it," Cal denied. "Ol' Alden, he knows an expert 'sign reader' when he sees one!"

"If you're an expert," Tige declared with some sarcasm, "I'm the King of England!"

Cal playfully pushed Tige in the face and turned to Monte. "Where's Alden now?"

"Oh, he's got the same idea you had a week ago to the effect that Don Bandido's still this side of the line. He started out alone this mornin' to look for the Don. Left word he wouldn't be back for a week or so, unless he caught him."

"Work at the Double-A," Cal declared gravely, "looks like it wouldn't be pressin' for a week or so. By the way, what happened to Hawk Larsen after I left? The sheriff try to do anythin' about it?"

Tige nodded. "Yeah—tried to! It wasn't no go, though. Yuh see, all Alden had to go on was the information Don Bandido gave Miss Tony, an', the Don not bein' here to back up his statements, they didn't carry no weight. Larsen denied the whole thing, of course. Told Alden that he'd fired Ed Masters an' them others a few days previous. Of course, Larsen couldn't be expected to be responsible for what they did when they wasn't on the Arrow-M payroll. The whole five that had the mix-up with Don Bandido has disappeared, except Ed Masters. We found Masters' body in that cabin. Larsen accepted the gold and gave a receipt for it. Said he wasn't goin' to put through the minin' property deal now, though, 'cause the money arrived too late—"

"All of which," Monte declared flatly, "sounds like a page outa one of these here fairy-tale books tuh me, an' makes me think that Larsen really was plannin' to run a whizzer on the Express Company like the Don told Miss Tony."

Tige agreed to this. "Yuh ain't alone in that idea, rannie. Only we needs proof. Until we gets that proof, Larsen knows that he's safe."

The men's voices weren't carrying far in the noise of the crowded barroom. Just the three of them getting what was said. At that, Monte lowered his voice now. "It looks tuh me," he speculated, "as though Larsen is expectin' to make trouble. Lost five men, but I note that within the week he's replaced them—not just ordinary cow-willies, neither. He's got five Texans on his payroll now. I ain't been close enough to see for certain, but their guns all looked notched!"

"One of the Texans is 'Dogger' Mathews," Tige supplemented. "Yuh've heard of him, Cal—an' his reputation."

Cal whistled softly. "Looks like trouble right *pronto* where Dogger ranges. How do yuh figger it?"

"Just what yuh said," Tige returned promptly "—trouble right *pronto!*"

Monte proceeded to enlighten the one who had been away. "Yuh see, Cal, Alden talked plenty stiff to Larsen 'bout what would be done as soon as proof was forthcomin'. Oh, the old man ain't fooled a bit. He'll act plumb sudden when he's got somethin' to go on. He an' Larsen had some pretty hot words the day Miss Tony arrived. The next day them Texans arrived at the Arrow-M. If yuh ask me, I'd say the Arrow-M was ready to declare war against the Double-A, the idea bein' to wipe out Alden an' our whole outfit before too much is uncovered. That's a warnin' for you, Cal. Keep your holster greased when yuh cross trails that Arrow-M waddies rides."

"Monte's throwin' yuh a straight rope when he says that," Tige added earnestly.

"Why, hell! every time any of us Double-A cow-willies meets them Arrow-M Texans we circles around each other like a coupla strange dawgs!"

Cal's bony face lighted. Something there to remind a man of an old war-horse sniffing powder smoke. "I always did crave to try results with some of these fast-shootin' Tehanners," he announced softly. "—Let's Bourbonize."

The three straightened around, shoulder to shoulder with the other customers lining the bar, and procured a bottle and glasses. Monte had lifted the bottle when some one jarred his arm, tried to crowd him from the bar.

"Take it easy, ol' hawss," Monte was objecting easily as he turned. His eyes hardened suddenly as they fell on the intruder. The other, a lean, scar-faced man, glared at the usually good-natured cowboy. For a moment neither spoke.

Then Monte, "Better pick out another place, Arrow-M. They ain't no room for yuh at this section of the bar."

"A feller's gotta get a drink, ain't he?" came in belligerent tones from Larsen's Texan.

"That's whatever," Monte answered quietly. "I said they ain't no room here —*for you!*"

"Meanin' what?" The tones were deadly now.

Monte swung around and faced the man squarely. "Meanin'," he snapped, "that I ain't got no use for Texans—your breed! Is that clear to yuh?"

Tige's fingers were lovingly fingering the butt of his gun now. On Cal's face had appeared a look of peaceful content.

"Tell him, Monte," Tige interjected eagerly, "that it's not the State of Texas we objects to—it's just the buzzards' pickin's that blow over this way from that State!"

"You lemme handle this, Tige," Monte declared in injured tones. "Go find a fight of your own. This feller's my meat."

The Texan laughed harshly. "Yuh travel in pairs, eh? One at a time'll suit me."

Cal had been waiting for something like this. "Nope," he announced, cutting in on the conversation, "they's three of us. If it's action you're cravin', go get your li'l' playmates. We'll show yuh some new games—an' they won't be 'marbles' or 'hop-scotch,' neither!"

"I'm acceptin' your invitation," from the Arrow-M man. Then, "Yuh won't run away?"

"Any runnin' we do," Cal declared firmly, "will be in pursuit of the snake that hired yuh, Hawk Larsen—an' I hope I won't stumble over your body on the way!"

The man turned and without another word disappeared in the crowd.

The three Double-A cowboys swung back to the bar. Only a few men in close proximity to the three had overheard the conversation, but now they began to edge away leaving a cleared space around Cal and his two friends.

"I think he was angry," Cal gently observed at last. "Anyway, I hope so!"

"Oh, he'll be back, all right," from Monte. "It was all a put-up job to start trouble, right from the first."

"Leave him alone an' he'll come back, draggin' his pals behind him," Tige sang under his breath.

"Yuh say they's five of these Tehanners?" asked Cal.

Monte nodded, as he slid his holster a bit nearer the front. Business was again going on as usual. The cleared space around the three cowboys still remained, however.

"Five of 'em," verified Tige. "All man-eaters, too—accordin' to the report Larsen's been spreadin'."

"Five—five—" Cal was repeating softly to himself, rolling the word around his tongue with a certain appearance of relish. Then, "Three of us—five of them Tehanners. That's one a-piece."

A frown appeared on Monte's forehead. "How yuh figgerin', cowboy? What do yuh mean, one a-piece?"

Cal grinned widely. "I was thinkin' 'bout you two—"

"Meanin'," Tige cut in, "that you're intendin' to take on three your ownself?"

Call nodded slowly with no small satisfaction.

Monte and Tige exchanged grins. "The feller sure hates himself, don't he, Tige?" Monte asked.

"Yeah," Tige answered, "if Cal's opinion of himself carried any weight, the United States wouldn't be under the expense of maintainin' a standin' army!"

"It's plain to see," Cal admitted placidly, "that you boys is just beginnin' to appreciate my worth."

Monte had been watching the reflection in the bar mirror. Now he interrupted the conversation. "There's Hawk Larsen—just comin' in."

Without turning, the three watched the movements of the Arrow-M owner as he passed through the door and dropped into a chair on the opposite side of the room. Whether Hawk was the name under which he had been christened—providing that event had ever taken place—or whether it was just a nickname, certain it was that it was appropriate. He looked the part of that bird of prey, with his hooked nose, bushy eyebrows, and narrow-lipped, cruel mouth curving down at the corners. A big blond man he was, but carrying easily every ounce of his hundred-ninety some odd pounds. A stiff-brimmed black Stetson was tilted down over one eye.

"Come in to see the party, I reckon," Monte commented in low tones, still watching the mirror.

"Gosh, I sure wish the rest of the Double-A was here," Tige said.

"Gettin' nervous at the odds against us?" Cal wanted to know.

A look of cold scorn answered him. "Hell, no, only I'd like for Big Dan an' Ted to be here to see the fun. I know they'll be disappointed."

"Don't be too anxious to open fire," warned Cal. "If we start shootin' the minute we see them Arrow-M hombres, it'll call for all five of 'em to open up at once. That's pro'bly what they want. We'll fool 'em. Let them make the first move. Tehanners will always give a man an even break, when possible. That means that only three of 'em will start the fight. Yuh won't have to watch the other two until yuh've dropped your man—"

"There they are," Monte announced. The three cowboys stood as before, backs to the doorway, reading the story in the bar mirror.

Hawk Larsen got to his feet when his Texans entered. Five of them there were, lean, hard-bitten men of the open range. Professional killers all, each one recognizing no law except that which he carried in his open holster. No particular malice prompting them to their job; a matter-of-fact, everyday method of earning the most money in the shortest time.

The five filed through the door, swinging hands brushing the gun-butts at hips. They spread out a bit, walking in a sort of half-crouch—something of the dancer in the easy sliding gait—weight thrown forward—

A wider space about the three cowboys at the bar now. Cal was talking leisurely, pouring three drinks from a brown bottle, apparently uninterested in the events taking place behind him.

One of the Texans was talking in loud tones. "There they are, boys—the fellers that announced a grudge against Texas!"

As one man, the three at the bar swung around to face their adversaries.

"Meanin' us, I suppose," Cal said gently. "You're wrong, Tehanner, it ain't the State of Texas I was referrin' to—it's what drifts over the line when they ain't wanted at home!"

Dogger Mathews, leader of the gunmen, took up the conversation. "Them's fightin' words, feller," he snapped.

Cal's laugh held more than a little of sarcasm. "Recognized 'em, eh? Yeah, that's what I mentioned the fact for. Do yuh have to be told any plainer that we're ready for yuh any time yuh feel like startin'?"

Dogger eyed the three cowboys facing him. There didn't seem to be any great hostility in their attitudes as they rested on the bar at their backs. Still he hesitated. This wasn't the usual way. He had expected the Double-A men to start shooting the instant he and his four companions appeared.

Heavy silence now. Occasionally someone in the barroom shifted weight and

caused a loose board to creak. Loud breathing from certain expectant individuals now aware that a fight was on. On the wall an old clock ticked with monotonous regularity. These were the only sounds to break the quiet. The tension was tightening; almost to the breaking point now.

Then came the interruption. No one had noticed Don Bandido enter the room. He stood just inside the doorway, a smile on his lips. It took but an instant to size up the situation. The guns in his hands clicked as the hammers came back.

"Stand just as yuh are!" he ordered, his voice cutting in on the quiet like the snap of a whip. "I'm pluggin' the first man to reach for a gun!"

CHAPTER VI

A Clean Getaway

FOR a few moments no one dared turn to see who the speaker was. Then Hawk Larsen took a chance. He whirled from the scene before him only to find himself gazing into the muzzle of one of Don's guns!

The Texans and the three Double-A punchers were still busy with their own affairs, none daring to remove eyes from his opponents.

Larsen's hands had gone skyward the instant he noted the Don had the drop on him. "Call off your men, Larsen," Don ordered sharply. "I ain't likin' that five against three arrangement."

Larsen seemed about to refuse. The Don's gun tilted a trifle. Larsen shrugged his shoulders. "All right, Dogger, the fight's off," he stated. "Better elevate."

Dogger Mathews' arms reached skyward, the other four Texans following his example.

For the first time Cal permitted his eyes to wander in the Don's direction. He knew without being told that this was Don Bandido, the much-wanted outlaw. He thought of the reward being offered for the Don's capture. Then Cal grinned. He was appreciating now that Don Bandido had probably saved him and his two pals from extermination.

Don glanced at Cal, answered the grin. "Double-A, ain't yuh?"

"Yeah, the three of us," Cal answered.

Don was again watching Hawk Larsen, but continued the conversation with Cal. "Know who I am?"

"I oughta. Been trailin' yuh for a week—or tryin' to."

"I know—I was about half a mile behind yuh most of the time," Don answered dryly.

Cal's jaw dropped for a minute. Then he recovered, and grinned. "I'll be buyin' yuh a drink on that, first chance."

"Thanks. Are yuh still lookin' to collect that reward, or do we declare a truce?"

"Let's make it a truce," Cal proposed. "I never did hanker to get rich."

Don Bandido breathed more freely. He felt right then that it would be more than a truce. He'd have the backing in the business at hand. It was the Double-A and Arrow-M men he had feared most. "I'll be appreciatin' it if yuh'll relieve Larsen an' these Texans of the weight they're carryin'."

"That'll be what's called one of the simple pleasures of the poor," Cal answered. Then to Tige and Monte, "C'mon, rannies. We're collectin' hardware."

The next few minutes were devoted to disarming the Texans and Hawk Larsen. The Arrow-M men squirmed with rage, but it did no good.

"Larsen'll be packin' an under-arm gun, too," Don informed, as he watched the proceedings. Larsen shot a look of hate at the Don, as Cal reached under his vest and produced a short, snub-nosed weapon.

"What do yuh want done with these guns?" Cal asked, when the disarming had been completed.

"Turn 'em over to the barkeep," Don answered. "They'll buy a drink for the house after I'm gone."

He paused and turned to the crowd in the barrom. "Mostly," he said, raising his voice, "I'm here to make an announcement to the effect that I'm givin' up my game! I've been accused of everythin' from hold-ups to murder, but it ain't so. Hawk Larsen has spread the report that

I'm the one that's responsible for all the bandit business that's goin' on around here, but the only man I've ever took anythin' from is Hawk hisself. I got a good reason for that, too. If the truth was known, I reckon yuh'd find that Hawk an' his Arrow-M men have been doin' some stick-up work themselves. Otherwise why did they take the trouble to furnish up that cabin where I finished Masters last week? A nice little hide-out, it looked like to me. They's more things that I know about Larsen, an' he's hopin' I'll get bumped off before I get a chance to tell 'em——"

"Hey," Dogger Mathews interrupted, "how long we gotta stretch our arms?"

"Drop 'em now," Don consented. "I don't reckon I got nothin' to fear from you Arrow-M's any more to-night." Again he raised his voice, this time speaking directly to Hawk Larsen. "Larsen," he said, "I'm givin' you your chance. You can clear your conscience an' get out of the country, or you can stay an' fight. Which is it goin' to be?"

Larsen found his voice after a few moments. "I don't know what you're talkin' about," he growled.

"Liar!" The one word sounded through the room like the crack of a rifle. Then Don continued, "I'm takin' it that you intend to stay an' fight. Well, that suits me!"

Larsen was recovering the grip on himself now. "They won't be much fight," he rasped. "The whole State's against yuh." He turned to the crowd. "There's a reward on this man's head—dead or alive! Some of you fellers with guns collect it now. I'll add one thousand of my own money for his death—"

Cal's gun was out now, as were Tige's and Monte's. The three cowboys ranged themselves near Don. "If anybody's figgerin' to collect that reward," Cal drawled softly, "they got me to contend with first! I don't know nothin' about the Don except that he proved up as a square-shooter a while back when Hawk Larsen sent Ed Masters an' some others to hold up the stage. Yuh've all heard about that—"

Larsen's face was purple with rage now. "That's all a damn lie," he shouted. "I'd fired Masters an' them others two days before it happened. I ain't responsible for what they did."

Hawk Larsen wasn't at all popular with the crowd, and now they were quick to swing with Cal Howden.

"It ain't been proved that yuh ain't responsible," someone in the room shouted.

Larsen sensed the sway of feeling against him and played his trump card. "You're all behavin' like a bunch of kids," he exclaimed. "Use your heads. If it ain't enough that this Don Bandido is a menace to the community, I'll tell yuh somethin' else." His voice lowered while the crowd waited in breathless expectancy. "This feller that calls himself Don Bandido," Larsen announced coolly, "is Don March, son of old Dick March that used to own the Arrow-M spread before I got it. Most of yuh have heard how this hold-up feller killed his old man when he heard that the ranch was to be willed to me. At least, that's what everybody thinks he killed him for—"

"That's enough, Larsen," Don cut sharply in. His voice was cold and hard now. "I'm admittin' I'm Don March. Larsen had me thrown in jail. I escaped. As for killin' my father, I reckon if the truth was known, it was done by Hawk Larsen. I ain't got no proof of that, but they's somethin' inside that tells me. When I get proof—God help you, Larsen!"

The words were clipped short, deadly. Larsen's information had done damage, though, and Don saw that the tide of feeling was again turning against him. The men in the big room were getting restless. Holding up a stage was one thing, but for a man to kill his own father was an entirely different proposition. The crowd didn't realize it at the time, but the fact that Larsen had spoken truth when he revealed Don's identity, had reacted favorably on its mind, and made it believe that all of Larsen's other statements were true. Fickle, mob-like, the occupants of the saloon were again swinging to Larsen's side.

Only Cal, Monte and Tige stood their ground, but they were few against many.

Don accepted coolly his momentary defeat. "I'll be leavin' shortly," he stated. "The first man to follow me through this door gets a slug of lead—"

Even before he'd completed the sentence his guns swung upward. Came a rapid succession of quick barking reports and every lamp hanging from the ceiling was shattered. The room was plunged instantly into Stygian darkness!

All was confusion now. There came a sudden rush of feet to get out of range in the event Don threw further shots. Some place in the room a table creaked—crashed under the strain as a knot of struggling men made their weight felt. For an instant a figure was silhouetted against the open doorway. Then above the din of cursing, struggling figures there came the roar of a forty-five!

That started it. The crowd made for the entrance, jammed there a moment, every man trying to fight past his neighbor. The first man to stumble through the massed figures ran to the center of the road.

Far down the street he saw a lone horseman. The man raised his gun and commenced firing. Others joined him and the drumming of flaming guns drowned out all other sounds. The horseman was too far away by this time to be in any danger, but, nevertheless, he put spurs to his mount and tore off into darkness. As a matter of course, the crowd streamed after him, shooting as it went.

Back in the saloon two swearing bartenders rose slowly above the bar when the crowd had departed. One of them groped in the gloom until he had located a lantern. A match flared and a moment later the lantern was casting its feeble light along the mahogany bar—hardly enough light to illuminate the whole interior, though.

The bartender gasped with some amazement when he noted that Cal, Monte, and Tige were still in the room, now standing at the bar.

"Kind of a nice little ruckus," Cal was saying calmly. "Me, I'm hoping the Don got away—"

The slam of a door behind them interrupted the sentence. They turned to see Don Bandido—or to give him his real name, Don March—standing just inside the entrance. He bolted the door and turned toward the three cowboys, a broad grin of satisfaction on his face.

"Well—I'll—be—damned!" Cal ejaculated, gazing in amazement.

"Yuh didn't leave then?" Monte asked stupidly.

"Nope, I guess I didn't," Don drawled. "I just stood to one side an' let that locoed crowd rush past me. I knew as soon as somebody reached the door they'd think it was me, an' then follow after. Judgin' from the shootin', they must have found somebody to throw lead at, thinkin' it was me. I hope nobody got hurt on my account." It was learned later that no one had. The lone horseman had soon left the crowd far behind.

"Somethin' was said 'bout buyin' a drink," Tige suggested hopefully. "After all this I'm needin' one."

Don tossed some money on the bar. "Take it outa that, barkeep. Keep the change to pay for them lamps I busted."

He turned to the three cowboys. "I had to stay behind a minute to thank yuh for not takin' advantage when I was coverin' Larsen an' them Texans, an' for backin' me up later."

"Shucks!" Cal answered awkwardly, "We couldn't throw down on yuh without no warnin'."

"Regardless of that," Don insisted, "they's a reward on my head. Yuh coulda collected."

"At the same time," Monte put in, "yuh kinda broke up that little affair we was havin' with them Texans. We'd pro'bly got three of 'em, but now that it's all over I'm admittin' that five was too many for us to handle. Nope, I reckon the score's even."

Don didn't speak for a few moments. Finally, "Yuh understand of course," he said slowly, "that I didn't kill my father."

"Hell, Don!" Cal exploded. "Yuh don't need to tell *us* that! We know!"

"Thanks." Just the one word from Don, but it held a world of meaning.

There was an awkward silence for a

few minutes. The two bartenders were still staring in amazement at Don. It was gradually dawning on them that the crowd had acted hastily.

One of them procured a bottle and glasses, placed them on the bar. "Here's the drinks we're havin' on them Texans' guns," he laughed shortly. "Drink hearty!"

"How yuh figgerin' on gettin' away?" Tige asked Don a few minutes later.

"No trouble 'bout that," Don answered. "My horse is waitin' out back."

"Yuh don't look ahead nor nothin', do yuh?" Cal said, admiration for the Don's foresight shining in his eyes.

"I have to in my business," Don answered quietly.

A few minutes later a pounding was heard at the saloon entrance.

"They're comin' back," Cal said, "so yuh better drift, Don."

Don gripped the hands of the three men. "I'll see yuh some more, fellers," he promised. An instant later he had disappeared through the rear door.

It was difficult to hear the pounding of a horse's hoofs, owing to the noise of the crowd out in front, but Cal waited until he was quite sure that Don had made a clean getaway before he unbolted the door and let the men in.

Larsen and his Texans didn't return. At best, it would have been a humiliating experience to come back and request their guns, after being held up by one man. The Texans decided it would be better to buy new ones; they also decided that Larsen would pay for them.

So it came about the following day that the keeper of the general store did a brisk business in hardware.

CHAPTER VII

Tony Explains

TONY ALDEN and her uncle, Sheriff Art Alden, sat talking on the wide veranda of the Double-A ranch house. Alden had just come in after a week of fruitless search for Don Bandido.

Alden was a big individual, both mentally and physically, who had discarded a slim waistline some years before. A stern man he could be at times, but everyone who knew him swore that Alden was white clear through—as white as the shaggy, snowy eyebrows that adorned his frosty blue eyes. He had been a widower for years and all—or nearly all—his interests were tied up in his ranch. The office of sheriff had been thrust on him over his own wishes, but once the star of authority was fastened to his vest, he did his utmost to carry the position with honor to himself and the men who had elected him.

The last two or three summers Tony had left her father's ranch in Idaho to come down and visit a few months with her uncle. It relieved the monotony of existence for Alden, and he was fond of his unusually capable niece. They met on a man-to-man basis; that was what Alden liked about the girl.

He had come in dusty and worn from the week's work, something of dejection in his manner. Alden hated to fail in anything he undertook to accomplish, and, except for his failure to capture Don Bandido, the sheriff's record was clear.

Now as he dropped into a rocking-chair at Tony's side, after the first greetings were over, his big figure sagged a trifle. His saddle-muscles weren't quite up to the task that such trailing called for. As Alden had phrased it, "That Don Bandido is as hard to lay hands on as a greased pig on ice! Trouble is, he keeps a feller guessin' all the time. Just about the time the trail gets warm he plumb disappears!"

Tony smiled at that. "I told you last week when you started out it wouldn't do any good," she reminded. "He'll show up here one of these days."

"Bosh!" Alden snorted. "Ye don't know what ye're talkin' about, Tony. D'ye think he's such a fool as to walk right into the arms of the law?"

"I don't think he's a fool an' I don't think he'll walk into the arms of the law," Tony retorted, "but I do think he'll come here when he gets ready. He promised he would!"

"Promise or no promise, I don't believe it! Ten to one he's 'way down in Southern Mexico by this time."

"The man you call Don Bandido," Tony answered with some spirit, "will do anything he has promised to do. I know!"

"What do ye mean by that 'the man I call Don Bandido'?" Alden asked curiously.

Tony looked at him in astonishment. "Didn't you see any of the boys when you came in?"

"No—why? I come straight here from the corral. They wasn't nobody around."

"You haven't heard then?" Tony asked.

Alden looked up with sudden interest. "Heard what?" he queried with some irritation.

"That Don—Bandido was in Oreana Wells the night of the day you left here—"

"What?" Alden almost shouted.

"I'm not foolin'," Tony affirmed. "I got the whole story from Cal. Hawk Larsen has five Texas gunmen working for him now, as you know. The Texans were all set for trouble with Cal and Monte and Tige at the Spotted Cayuse Saloon. Don came in and spoiled the whole show—" She broke off and told the story in detail as it had been related to her by Cal, not neglecting to put in the words of praise that Cal had had for the Don.

"So you see," Tony finished, "Bandido's real name is Don March. He's the son of the man who once owned Larsen's Arrow-M Ranch."

For several minutes Alden was too astonished to speak. He looked at her in amazement, then finally exploded. "Well I'll be everlastingly blasted!"

And then, a few moments later, "Why—why, I knew Dick March, an' his boy, too. That is, I was acquainted with 'em slightly in the old days. March was a widower like me. I was a stranger here then, but they both struck me as bein' pretty white men. I 'member I was plumb surprised when I heard that the boy had killed his father. I sure gotta catch the Don now."

"Why are you so intent on catching him, Uncle Art? Surely we owe him something for—for the way he treated me and for returning that gold. I know he isn't bad."

Alden nodded. "Ye're right, I think, Tony, but just the same he's stole from Hawk Larsen. He admits that, accordin' to the story ye tell me. That makes him a law-breaker in the eyes of the law on one count, anyway. He's suspected of murderin' his father. That's two counts—"

"Suspected," Tony pointed out. "Well, that doesn't prove that he's guilty."

"What did he run away for then?"

"He'll probably explain that when he sees you."

"I hope so," Alden stated fervently. "I'll tell ye, Tony, in the first place, regardless of what he's done for you, I've got to uphold the law. That means bringin' him to justice. In the second place, he's made accusations against Hawk Larsen that I want to talk to him about. Ye see, I ain't got no love for Larsen, more especially right now since he's imported them Texans. Larsen don't like me no better'n I like him. That means that one of these fine days they's goin' to be war! My personal opinion is that Larsen's crookeder than a dawg's hind laig, but I ain't got no proof to that effect. Larsen don't want me to get no proof, neither."

There was silence for several minutes. Tony sat staring across the sage-dotted range toward the trail that led across the Double-A Ranch.

"Uncle Art," Tony said at last, "I want you to promise me that if Don comes here you'll be nice to him."

"Nice to him?" Then sarcastically. "Sure, I'll be nice to him. I'll get a band out to greet him an' put lace curtains at the jail windows—"

Tony smiled a bit wistfully. "Be serious, please—"

"Serious? Serious!" Alden exclaimed. "I ain't nothin' else where that danged outlaw is concerned."

"He isn't a 'danged outlaw'!" Tony flared.

Something in the girl's voice made Alden hesitate. He looked steadily at her a moment, then said in a softer voice, "Tony girl, I don't reckon we're goin' to quarrel, are we? Why, I don't know what I'd do without you to run the house for me summers."

"You would probably do," Tony answered stiffly, "as you've done for the past several years—let Juana run things. She's very capable. I do scarcely anything."

"Sure, sure," Alden agreed hastily, "Juana is jest fine—but she's a breed-woman. Ye see, I kinda like to have you here bossin' the house for me. I get plumb lonesome for my own kin I can tell ye—"

Tony relented suddenly. "I understand, Uncle Art," she replied fondly. "Speaking of Juana reminds me that I'd better go in and see how she's getting along with supper. I'll hurry her up. You're probably tired and hungry after being away so long——"

She rose and started for the door, but Alden got suddenly to his feet and barred the way. "Tony," he asked, "jest why are ye so interested in Don Bandido?"

Tony looked away. "I must go in and see about supper," she evaded.

"Never mind supper for a minute. I'd like to know why ye're so convinced that he's O.K."

"Ask Cal—and Monte and Tige," Tony advised. "They've taken a sudden liking to him, too."

"I can understand that," Alden said steadily, "because he saved 'em bein' wiped out by them Arrow-M Texans. It's *your* viewpoint I want."

Tony continued to gaze off across the range, not meeting his eyes. "Why—why," she faltered, "I suppose it was because he was—was nice to me—that night he saved me from Masters and the other two—"

Alden placed both hands on her shoulders. "Tony," he said, "ye're not foolin' me a bit. Yuh ain't told me everythin' about that night. If ye're lookin' for me to give the boy a square deal, I gotta have all the facts."

The girl suddenly swung around and faced him squarely. Her words came firmly with sudden decision. "I'll tell you, Uncle Art," she said. "It's because he's decent and clean and considerate. I—well—well, for a few minutes that night I lost my head. I was tired out and scarcely knew what I was doing. He'd won me at cards, as I told you, and at that time it seemed the simplest thing in the world for me to keep the bargain. I asked him to—to take me with him. He understood me better than I did myself, and he refused—"

Alden was looking at her in sudden amazement. His hands dropped slowly from the girl's shoulders. "And the Don refused to take yuh at your word?" he gasped.

Tony nodded. "He even refused to listen to me."

The big man was lost in thought, his mind far away. "I don't know," he said slowly at last, "if I'd been him, whether I could have done that or not. I don't think I'd had—that much sense. I think, Tony, I'm beginnin' to get your side of it a mite clearer." He looked at her a moment longer, Tony gravely meeting the steady scrutiny of the unwavering blue eyes. Then Alden smiled. "Ye're pretty easy to look at, girl. I think he was a danged fool for not takin' yuh along," he grunted.

The tension eased, disappeared. "I'm not so sure myself," Tony laughed, "but what you're right!"

Again Alden grew serious. "Ye're hard hit, eh, girl?"

Tony smiled gravely. "I've know since the first minute I saw him—there could never be anybody else."

Alden didn't have an answer for this.

"And now that you've wormed that information out of me," Tony smiled again, "I'll go in to see about supper."

The man stood aside to let her pass, and then dropped wearily down to his rocker to think things over. He pulled out a battered old brier pipe, stuffed it with tobacco and touched flame to the bowl. A minute later it had gone out, but still he sat drawing nothing but air through the pipe-stem—unnoticing.

The sun dropped below the far-flung western ridges and the shadows deepened. Dusk came. It wasn't until a lamp was lighted inside the house, throwing its broad flare of light through a window and over the silent figure in the rocking-chair, that Alden stirred. He got slowly to his feet and started for the door.

"If this ain't one hell of a mess!" he

muttered. "Me supposed to be lookin' out for my brother's only daughter, then she has to go an' fall in love with a bandit I'd give my right eye to lay hands on. Damn! I sure got to find that boy an' get him straightened out somehow—"

The table was steaming with food when he entered the dining-room.

CHAPTER VIII

Don Keeps His Promise

JUANA, the breed serving woman who served as cook and housekeeper for Alden, had retired to her kitchen. Supper was over, but Tony and Alden still sat over their coffee. The sheriff was plainly troubled over the disclosure Tony had made to him. They talked the matter over in detail, but the frowns of worry on Alden's forehead refused to disappear.

"Yuh see," Alden was saying, "it's puttin' me in a tough position. When I took office I swore to uphold the law. That means it's up to me to bring in this Don Bandido—dead or alive! That's my duty! On the other hand I'm obligated to him on three counts: for bringin' you in safe, for returnin' that gold, an' for savin' my boys bein' shot up by Larsen's Texans—"

"But, Uncle Art," Tony broke in, "won't his good deeds offset his bad ones—at least, what folks consider his bad ones?"

"I'm afraid not," Alden returned, shaking his head. "They's that old murder charge against him, if nothin' else. Things like that can't be dismissed off-hand. Escapin' from jail when they had him arrested for that, makes it look all the worse. He shoulda stayed an' faced trial—"

At that moment Cal appeared from the kitchen. He came into the room bearing a small canvas sack. "Here's the mail, Miss Tony—" He broke off at sight of Alden. "Oh, hello there, Sheriff. I didn't know yuh was back."

"Yes, got in a little while before supper. Cup o' cawffee, Cal?"

Cal shook his head. "Just finished supper, thanks. Did yuh have any luck catchin'—"

"Ye know damn' well, I didn't," Alden growled, something of irritation in the tones. "They ain't no use of you askin' me, Cal. But I'll get him if it's the last thing I do! The law has to be upheld. I'll get him yet!"

"Sure yuh will, Sheriff," Cal soothed. He grinned as he dropped into a chair. "Yuh ain't never yet failed to bring in your man."

"Uh-huh," Alden commented dismally. "Mebbe not—but I'm beginnin' to understand that they's a heap of truth in the ol' sayin' that they's a fust time for everythin', an' that a beer pitcher can go to the saloon once too often! What's new in Oreana Wells, Cal?"

"Business goin' on as usual," Cal answered. "I'll tell yuh one thing though: folks is kinda considerin' that talk Don Bandido gave about Larsen in the Spotted Cayuse t'other night. By the way, did Miss Tony tell yuh—"

"Yeah, she told me the whole story," Alden nodded. " 'Bout you havin' the run-in with them Texans an' everythin'. The Don kinda put me in his debt a mite deeper when he messed into that ruckus. It's sure hard work, Cal, makin' myself want to catch that hombre— But what was ye sayin'?"

"Folks is kinda turnin' over in their minds what the Don told 'em the other night," Cal resumed. "The Don said things about Hawk Larsen that made 'em think heavy, after they'd cooled down. Anyway, public opinion is turnin' against Hawk, an' him not bein' very popular anyhow, folks is wantin' to see the Don get a square hearin'—"

"I don't suppose," Tony smiled, "that you and Monte and Tige had anything to do with that."

"We mighta helped a bit," Cal admitted modestly. "Everytime one of us went to Oreana Wells we said a good word for the Don— Anyway, Hawk Larsen went to the county house this mornin' to persuade the authorities to increase the reward offered for Don's capture. The upshot of the whole matter was that they refused. Larsen got peeved an' shot off his mouth a heap. Just to show him that

he wasn't runnin' the county, Judge Higgins an' a coupla others got together an' arranged to withdraw the reward altogether—"

"Oh, that's just fine," from Tony. "I'm so glad!"

Alden looked up with sudden interest. "That'll make things a mite easier. Folks ain't so interested in seein' a man brought in, when they ain't no reward offered."

"Wait a minute," Cal interposed, "they's still a reward. Larsen has put up one thousand dollars of his own money for the Don's capture. He's addin' an additional five-hundred for his death! Hawk left a check for the reward at the county house."

Tony's face fell. Alden, however, struck with a new idea, brightened.

"That ain't as bad as it might be," he commented cheerfully. "It makes the Don's position a trifle stronger against Larsen. Folks'll see that Larsen has got some particular reason for wantin' the Don's finish. Now if I could only capture that boy before somebody else does—" The sentence remained unfinished, the look on Alden's face denoting deep thought along new channels.

"What were you saying, Uncle Art?" Tony asked finally.

"Nothin', nothin'," Alden answered, a chuckle in the words. "I was just considerin' the high cost of dancin' pumps for men my age!"

"In other words," Tony speculated, "what you were thinking is none of our business."

"It's more your business than it is mine," Alden assured her meaningly, "only I ain't ready to lift the curtain yet."

After some further talk, Cal departed for the bunkhouse and again left Tony and Alden to themselves. Each night after supper Tony set about rolling a supply of cigarettes for the sheriff that would last him until bedtime. Now she procured Durham and brown papers and started in.

She had rolled a dozen or so when a knock at the front door interrupted her. The sheriff, still sitting over his coffee and tobacco, stirred lazily. "Call Juana an' let her answer it," he said.

Tony rose from her chair. "I'll go." Alden made no answer as he again settled comfortably in his seat. In a moment the dining-room door had closed behind the girl.

Tony passed through the living room and opened the front door. There stood Don Bandido, sombrero in one hand, a bunch of wild flowers in the other.

For a moment the girl just stared at him—all a-tremble now.

The man spoke first. "I thought mebbe yuh might like these flowers," he was saying softly. "I've been runnin' across 'em all day. Somehow, they reminded me a heap of you—"

Tony reached for the bouquet. "Oh, I knew you'd come," she breathed.

"Yes'm," he answered simply. "I'm keepin' that promise I made a coupla weeks back. I just had to see yuh—" The yellow lamplight from the house shone brightly on his sleek black hair and intensified the tenderness in his face.

Tony's hand reached out to touch him. Still he held back, as though conscious that his reputation was barring him from all that he held dear. Something fine in his desire to keep the girl inviolate.

"Oh, my dear," Tony was saying swiftly, "you must go—at once. My uncle—Sheriff Alden—is here. He understands. I've told him everything, but his duty comes first."

"I'm not leavin' until I see the sheriff." Something of doggedness in the tones now.

"No, no, no!" There was a note of terror in the girl's voice that went straight to the Don's heart. "You mustn't stay—it isn't safe—they'd put you in jail."

"It's the only way I can see my way clear—to you," the man answered. "I've got to face things, talk to the sheriff—"

"It isn't only the law I fear," the girl broke in wildly. "There's Hawk Larsen. Once you're disarmed, he'll find a way to kill you—"

"I'll chance that," Don answered tenderly. "Just seeing you makes the danger more than worth while. Larsen can do nothing that I fear. I mean to see him soon—"

"Then that means more trouble," the girl protested hopelessly. "I couldn't stand that." All reserve was swept away by the pent-up force of her emotions now beyond restraint. She swayed toward him. "Don't you understand what you mean to me? Don—Don, you haven't kissed me yet—"

Her words were too much for the man. There was a half-sob in his throat as he gathered the girl into his aching arms, long hungry for the feel of her soft embrace. Soft dusk and quiet in that sudden blur of emotions. The girl was laughing softly through her tears. Even the night-birds seemed hushed in the perfection of the moment—

Back in the dining-room, the sheriff missed the flow of minutes for a while. He'd been lost in thought for some time before it came to him that Tony had been gone unusually long. There had been voices, reaching him but dimly from the front of the house. Now all had been quiet for some time. Alden sensed that something out of the ordinary was taking place.

The sheriff rose and buckled on his gun. What it was he didn't know, but he felt quite certain that the matter should be investigated. He passed through the living room, through the open door, and then outside.

At first Alden could see nothing. Then came a movement from the shadows at one end of the veranda.

"That you, Tony?" the sheriff queried sharply.

For a moment no answer. Then, "Yes, Uncle Art." A mixture of fear and happiness in the girl's reply.

"What's up?"

Again no answer. A man's figure took form in the darkness as Don approached Alden.

Unconsciously Alden stepped back from the light pouring from the open door. His eyes were becoming accustomed to the gloom now. Then he took note of the high-crowned Mexican sombrero in Don's hand. In a flash it came to him who the visitor was.

At that moment Don stepped into the glare of light, one thumb hooked casually in his cartridge belt. From behind came stifled words of protest from Tony.

"Don Bandido!" Alden gasped.

"Don March, if yuh don't mind," the man corrected easily, nothing of hostility in his tone.

With a muttered exclamation, Alden's right hand reached to holster. His gun flashed out and up. Marvelously fast the old sheriff was. "Stick 'em up!" he yelled. "At last I got ye!"

But before he could bring the gun to bear on Don, Alden found himself staring bewilderedly into the round black muzzle of the other's forty-five! "You're sure fast, Sheriff," Don congratulated him. "I reckon I had a heap of luck on my draw!"

"Luck nothin'," Alden snorted disgustedly, as his own gun was jammed back into holster. "Anybody, hombre, that can draw as fast as you, don't need luck. He's been born with more'n his share! Well, young feller, what ye aimin' to do? I know when I'm licked."

Don laughed softly. With a quick deft motion the trigger-guard of the Colt was twirled on his finger, then the gun was extended, butt-foremost, to the sheriff. "I'm surrenderin', Sheriff Alden!"

The girl was at Don's side now, protesting, but Don shook his head as he added, "Take my gun, Sheriff."

Still Alden said nothing, his jaw hanging in amazement. He couldn't find words for a situation of this kind. Twice his hand stretched out to take the weapon, and twice the hand was withdrawn as though he suspected a trick of some kind. By now Don was laughing outright at Alden's surprise.

Finally he found his tongue. "Yuh better keep that gun for a time," the sheriff advised gruffly. "I reckon I know that when a feller's got the drop on me an' then gives me the best of the argyment I ain't got nothin' to fear from him. Had yore supper? Come in an' have some cawfee, anyway. You'n me's goin' to parley a mite. I been hopin' I could see yuh."

He stood aside for the girl and Don to

pass into the house, then fell in behind. "Go get Juana, will ye, Tony?" he said. "Tell her to brew up a pot of cawfee *pronto.*"

The girl was feeling easier now. She laughed happily. "I'll make it myself," she stated.

"And, boy," Alden declared, "Tony sure makes *cawfee!*"

And then the three of them were seated about the table. Tony's coffee proved to be all that Alden said it was. For Don it was a matter of supreme happiness to be seated across from the girl, watching the graceful curve of her arm as she filled the cup. Strife and trouble were forgotten in that moment. The peace of contentment had settled over the room.

The men talked while Tony rolled cigarettes. Her task included a supply for Don now. At last Don pushed back his plate and cup, lighted a smoke and suggested, "Well, Sheriff, you said something about a parley. When do we start?"

Alden nodded. "Now ye're talkin'. They tell me ye announced in the Spotted Cayuse the other night that ye was through with this hold-up business ye been follerin'. Is that right?"

Don nodded. "All through," he affirmed.

"Good," from Alden. "Tell me somethin' else: did ye kill your father?"

A flash of anger showed in Don's gray eyes, then it died out as he answered, "No, I didn't. I wasn't figuring it would be necessary to deny that to you, Sheriff."

"It wasn't," Alden agreed hastily. "I jest wanted to hear ye say it, that's all, so I could back ye up when folks asks questions. Now tell me all about this bandit business and how ye got started that way."

Don blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling, then commenced. "It all goes back to the time my father was murdered. The day before his death he was talking things over with me. Maybe he had a premonition that something was going to happen. I dunno. Anyway, he said he was going to town next day and have a will drawn up, leaving me the Arrow-M Ranch. Hawk Larsen was Dad's foreman at that time and he overheard us talking. We trusted Larsen and thought nothing of it when he came walking out of the barn near the spot where we were talking. I went to bed that night, but slept later than usual the next morning. I've always thought that Larsen put something in my food or drink to make me sleep as late as I did. Anyway, the first thing I knew was that Larsen came into my room and awakened me with the accusation that I'd killed Dad—"

"Wasn't they a gun with two empty shells in it found in your room?" Alden broke in. "Yuh see, I gotta get all the facts in this case. All I've heard was what people told me at the time. I didn't know you an' your Dad so well, yuh'll remember."

Don nodded, as he tossed his cigarette butt through an open window nearby. "Yes, a gun such as you describe was found on the table in my room. Of course, Larsen could have placed it there before I woke up. I'm sure he did do just that. Anyway, he said that Dad's body had been found just outside the door in the yard. Then he accused me of the murder an' took me into town at the point of a gun—turned me over to Lon Kelty, who was sheriff at that time. When we got there, Larsen produced a will to the effect that he was to get the Arrow-M. Lon Kelty showed me the will which I declared to be a forgery. Larsen advanced a theory that Dad an' me had quarreled because the ranch hadn't been left to me. 'Course, I wasn't much more'n a kid, an' Larsen was thought more of than he is now. Folks didn't know him then. Consequently, people took Larsen's word for the whole thing, an' nobody'd listen to me when I said I was innocent of the crime."

"Who killed your father?" Tony asked, her pretty face alight with interest. "Do you think it was Larsen?"

"I'm almost certain of it," Don answered. "And yet, I haven't any proof. Anyway, they put me in jail. I saw that things were going against me, so I escaped at the first opportunity." He turned to the sheriff. "Yuh'll remember that was a pretty poor excuse for a jail in them days. It wasn't no trouble to pull loose a coupla

iron bars an' squeeze through a window."

Alden nodded his head, and Don again took up the thread of his narrative. "I got away from Oreana Wells as soon as possible and headed down into Mexico. For the first three years I worked around at anything I could find. I punched cows, mined, handled the pasteboards in a honkytonk. All the time, though, I'd been doin' a heap of practisin' with my gun. Yuh see, I was pointin' myself for the time when I could face Hawk Larsen. As the months passed an' then turned into years, it seemed like I was gettin' farther an' farther from ever findin' my father's murderer, or gettin' back the Arrow-M I knew the ranch really belonged to me, so I started out to get as much of it as possible. White folks hadn't given me a square deal on this side of the Border, so I picked a crew of hard-ridin' Mexicans to help me. Then we began makin' things hum for Larsen. My gang ran off his cows an' horses every possible chance, rebranded, an' then sold them down in Mexico. Once in a while one of my Mexicans would come up here and spy on Larsen. Whenever we heard of him carrying any money, I held him up and took it away from him."

Don paused a moment. "The first time I stuck-up Larsen," he resumed, "he recognized me. I don't think he ever told anybody who Don Bandido really was, though. He wanted the March name forgot altogether. Instead, he began spreadin' a report that Don Bandido was responsible for every hold-up that was pulled in the county, hopin' that somebody would kill me before I got a chance to bring up the old business." He stopped to light a cigarette, then added, "It may interest yuh to know that my gang's dissolved now."

Alden nodded, then asked, "Is Larsen the only one yuh ever stole—took things from?"

"Yep." Then Don grinned. "Except a coupla general stores I robbed of groceries two or three times when I was short of money. Oh, I didn't want the food for myself, but I had some Mexican friends that needed help bad." Then he added as an afterthought, "The Mexicans have been pretty good to me. It was them give me the name 'Don Bandido.'" Again he grinned, sheepishly this time. "The title kinda appealed to sometiin' in me, so I let it stick. I guess mebbe I ain't all through havin' kid ideas yet."

Tony liked that. There was something so frank and boyish in the statement.

"The matter of the stolen groceries can be easy fixed up," Alden said gruffly, although his eyes were twinkling. "They ain't nobody goin' to hold anythin' like that against ye. The rest ain't goin' to be so easy."

"What do you intend to do?" Tony asked her uncle.

"Keep still a minute, can't ye, girl?" Alden growled. "I'm tryin' to think."

Confident now that Alden would find some solution to the difficulty, Tony smiled across the table at Don. There was a world of love in the answering look he gave her.

"I'll tell ye," Alden broke in at last, "mebbe we can work it this way. Don, are ye willin' to surrender yourself to me an' leave things to my judgment?"

"I've already offered yuh my gun," Don answered simply, again proffering the weapon.

"Keep the gun, keep the gun," Alden refused testily. "I ain't the one to take away a man's sole means of defense. All right." His voice took on a more formal tone as he continued, "Donald March, you are now my prisoner. I warn you that anything you say may be used against you later!" Something of humor in his next words, "But for Gawd's sake lemme have all the facts, to see can we tie a rope around that box-ankled, spavined, gall-sored son-of-a-sheep-herdin' burro louse—"

"Don't swear, Uncle," Tony cut in.

"Who's swearin'?" Alden demanded irascibly. "Can't I talk about Larsen if I want to?"

"But why do you insist on taking Don prisoner?" Tony persisted.

"It's the only way to work things out," Alden answered. He turned to Don. "I got news from Cal this evenin' that the

county's withdrawed the reward that was offered for your capture."

"That's good news, anyway," Don commented, brightening.

"Yeah, that part of it is fine," from the sheriff. "Howsomever, Hawk Larsen is offerin' a reward on his own behalf. One thousand for your capture, fifteen hundred for your dead body!" Don commenced to speak, but Alden raised a hand for attention as he continued. "Now to stop folks from tryin' to collect that fifteen-hundred, I purposes to take ye as my prisoner an' collect one thousand for your capture."

Don was beginning to catch the idea, but he wasn't prepared for what was to follow. Tony was sure there was nothing mercenary in Alden's idea, but still she didn't quite comprehend why Alden should be collecting the thousand, unless it was to do Larsen out of that much money.

"I'll go to Oreana Wells in the mornin'," Alden continued, "an' collect that thousand. Then I'll see Judge Higgins—the Judge is an old friend of mine an' will do what I want him to—I'll see Higgins an' get him to arrange bail for ye, Don. Yore bail will amount to exactly one thousand dollars, no more, no less—"

They were all smiling now. Alden chuckled at the thought. "I reckon that'll make Larsen plumb sore that he ever offered a reward when he learns that it's goin' to be used to give you your freedom until ye're brought to trial. Oh, yes, that's somethin' else I'll fix with Higgins. They ain't nothin' much for the Judge to do these days, but he'll have to be so doggone busy after he talks to me, that your trial date will be set a long ways ahead. That'll give us time to see if we can't dig up a mite of evidence against Larsen—"

"But what's Don to do meantime?" Tony wanted to know.

"I'm comin' to that," Alden replied roughly, to cover his embarrassment at the light in the girl's eyes. "Gimme time, girl. Don't be rushin' me so. Don, are ye willin' to go to work for me for a spell?"

Don's voice trembled with the gratitude he was unable to put into words. "I'm willin' to do anythin' yuh say, Sheriff," he answered. "Seems to me I can't do no better than to follow your lead. I'm appreciatin' your help a lot—"

"Aw-w-w, don't ye be a-sloppin' over now," Alden growled. "I ain't doin' nothin' but my duty. It's up to me to see that justice is done to criminals. The way you two is actin' ye'd think I was doin' all this because I got some personal interest in ye. 'Tain't so at all!"

Tony left her chair and enveloped the old sheriff in her arms, kissed him soundly. "You're just an old dear, Uncle Art!"

"Here, here, don't ye be a-pawin' me that-a-way," Alden protested, but it was easy to see that he wasn't objecting very strenuously.

"Here's another thing, Don," he continued, when the girl had again seated herself. "Tony's already told me how things stand between you two. Now that I've seen ye, I can see things for myself."

Don's face flushed warmly. "Anythin' that Tony says, goes with me, Sheriff."

"No it don't," Alden denied, "not right away, anyhow. If Tony was to have her way, this'd be a reg'lar doves' nest around here. Yuh see, it's this way, Don: until ye're cleared of all the charges hangin' over your head, I'm askin' that you two don't go no further with this love business ye've cooked up between ye. Tony's my brother's only daughter, an' she's in my care. Consequently, I sure would be plumb embarrassed if you two was to run off an' get married or some other such fool stunt. I wouldn't be able to face my brother nohow if he got word that his daughter had married a bandit. The best thing for you'uns to do is to have patience for a while, an' not set folks to talkin'. We gotta get Don clear with the world first. How about it?"

Tony pouted a moment, but at length gave in. Don's response came instantly, if reluctantly. "Yuh've got the right idea, Sheriff," he answered steadily. "Things won't go no further."

"Traitor!" Tony accused, smiling wistfully.

"Good grief, gal!" Alden snorted. "We got to pertect yore name. Don't forget that ye're a woman, an' folks is allus ready to talk about a woman." Then, before she could protest further, "I'll get things fixed up in town right away, Don, so's folks won't be surprised if they see yuh walkin' the streets. Likewise, I'll give out that I've collected the reward and nobody's to start anythin' with ye. Long 'bout day after to-morrow when Oreana Wells knows that ye're out on bail, take a run into town an' get acquainted. People will like ye a heap if ye'll let 'em."

Waving away their thanks, he rose from the table. "C'mon, Don, we'll head down to the bunkhouse. Ye ain't met all my boys yet, but ye'll find they're jest as anxious an' ready to back ye up as Cal an' Tige an' Monte is." With that he turned and stomped out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Don and Tony were alone. The girl gained her feet and moved around the table to him as he arose. "Oh, Don," she murmured softly, and then again, "Oh, Don—"

There was no need for her to say more. The silence that followed his name told more plainly than words what was in her mind.

"Gosh, Tony," he said, his voice unsteady through sheer joy, "I'm so happy I can hardly talk—"

"Everything is going to come out all right, isn't it?"

He nodded. "That's something I'm sure of every time I look into your eyes. Just to be near you means everything—nothing else matters—"

She stood before him, waiting—face upturned to his. The man drew back a trifle, and his voice broke when he spoke. "I ain't forgettin' that I promised I wouldn't go no further. Just for a little while, now, girl, we'll have to be patient—like the sheriff asked us to—"

Her soft "good-night" lingered in his ears as he hurried out.

The sheriff was waiting on the back steps when Don emerged to the outside. Little was said as he rose and led the way to the bunkhouse which was situated some seventy-five yards from the house. The moon was up now, and the barns, corrals, and windmills were etched sharply against their surroundings. Two squares of yellow light in one side of the bunkhouse showed that the punchers had not as yet taken to blankets.

Alden flung open the door and entered, Don close at his heels. Cal, Monte, and Tige were engaged in playing seven-up with another puncher Don hadn't seen before. At a rough board desk sat Big Dan Miller, the foreman of the Double-A, his brow furrowed over the complexity of the ranch accounts which lay spread before him.

Straight past the card-players Alden led Don, ignoring the looks of astonishment on their faces. Don nodded to his acquaintances as he passed, but he could see that they were wondering whether or not he had been captured, or had come in of his own accord.

Big Dan Miller got to his feet as the two approached. He was a wide-shouldered, barrel-chested individual, standing above even the elongated Cal. He smiled genially and shook hands.

"This is Don March, Dan," Alden introduced. "Put him on the payroll as range-rider. That'll give him plenty freedom to ride where he wants—"

"Wow, cowboy!" came a yell from Cal as he heard the words. "The Double-A has sure got one fightin' outfit with an addition like this!"

Cal struggled to his feet to shake Don's hand, knocking over the card table in his haste. In another moment he and Monte and Tige were vigorously pumping Don's hand. The fourth cowboy, Ted Stephens, was now introduced. He was a short, stocky individual whose easy movements evinced plainly his ability with rope, horse, or gun.

"Cal told me 'bout that little ruckus yuh had with Larsen an' his Texans," Ted Stephens was saying. "I'd sure admired to have been there."

Alden was beaming. It was plain to be seen that the sheriff regarded his men in the same light as a father does his sons. "Ye've met the hull outfit, now, Don—

'ceptin' Wing Lee, our Chinese cook. I reckon he's in the cook-house shanty."

"Kinda looks," Cal ventured hopefully, "as though we was gettin' organized to play things to a standstill with Larsen an' his Texans—"

"Now, looky here, Cal," Alden interrupted, "don't ye be a-lookin' for trouble. That's one thing I want to impress on your minds: keep outa ruckuses o' all sorts. This is a peaceful outfit, an' as long as I'm sheriff I aims to keep the hull county that way!" Then noting the look of disappointment on Cal's face, he turned to big Dan with a wink, "Dan, how many rounds of rifle ca'tridges we got on hand?"

"Oh, a hundred, hundred-fifty, I reckon."

Alden dubiously shook his head. "'Tain't enough. An outfit to be plumb efficient should have that much for every hand. I'll get some more in town to-morrow. An' the rest of you boys see that ye got enough lead so's yore six-guns won't go hungry!"

With that he turned and departed. For a moment, after the door had slammed shut behind him, the men stood in silence. Cal spoke first. "Oh, no, Alden ain't expectin' no trouble," he murmured, a beatific smile spreading his homely features. "Not a-tall! We're a peaceful outfit, we are—BUT, not where snakes is concerned!"

It was nearly midnight before the conversation lapsed enough for Don to remember that his horse was still standing up in front of the ranch house.

CHAPTER IX

"Get Don Bandido!"

HAWK LARSEN lounged in the doorway of the Arrow-M bunkhouse. He was talking to the five Texans who were sprawled in various attitudes in the shade of the building. These five, since Ed Masters had been killed and four others of Larsen's men had departed for parts unknown, comprised—with the exception of one puncher, Blackie Boggs—the entire outfit of the Arrow-M.

These days Larsen wasn't needing a large outfit for the actual working of the ranch. All his energies now were bent to exterminating Don—if such were possible. At least he intended to try. The Texans, of course, had been hired for that purpose and also to wipe out the Double-A spread; Dogger Mathews and his four men refused absolutely to take any share in the working of cattle, or other ranch business.

In the past five years that Larsen had controlled the Arrow-M, the ranch had gradually deteriorated from a smooth-running, efficient organization to one which proved to be an eye-sore to all the cattlemen of the surrounding country. The buildings and fences were run down and in a sadly dilapidated condition. Repairs and paint were sorely needed everywhere. The big ranch house, which had once been old Dick March's pride, was now closed and never used except as a repository for worn-out equipment. Larsen lived in the bunkhouse with his men. Even the cattle were scrubby and showed signs of little of the blooded stock of former days. Don March had already run off a goodly number of the better animals.

Folks were beginning to grow suspicious of Hawk Larsen. The truth was that he found it easier to change brands than to raise stock of his own. Especially was this true where Double-A cattle were concerned. The Double-A brand lent itself admirably to Larsen's crooked work with a running iron. It was simply a matter of drawing a straight line over the two cross lines of the AA, and then adding to this extended line a winged tip and arrowhead, to convert the original brand to an Arrow-M (an arrow superimposed on a letter M).

Hawk straightened suddenly in the doorway, squinted, then with raised hand shielded his eyes from the slanting rays of the morning sun as he gazed along the trail running from Oreana Wells. A small cloud of dust was approaching rapidly at the heels of a rider who tore recklessly along the rough road.

Noting the expression on Hawk's face, Dogger Mathews rose to his feet and fol-

lowed the line of Larsen s intent gaze. "Somebody sure ridin' like hell was chasin' him," Dogger observed.

Larsen didn't answer for a few minutes, than as the rider came nearer, he observed, "That looks a heap like Blackie Boggs."

In a short time the horseman wheeled his pony and turned down toward the bunkhouse. As he tore past the ranch house, Boggs' dark swarthy features were clearly visible. "It is Blackie," Hawk affirmed. "Now I wonder what brought him back so soon. Usually when he goes to town he stays all day."

By now, all the Texans were on their feet. On came the horseman, then suddenly jerked his mount back to haunches in a cloud of flying gravel, at Hawk's side. The animal was streaked with foam and panting heavily.

"What's all the rush, Blackie?" Hawk demanded, scowling. "We ain't got so many horses that yuh can afford to ride 'em to death!"

Blackie Boggs slipped from the saddle. "After I tell yuh what's happened, yuh won't be so ready to jump me," he grumbled.

"Well, out with it," Larsen snapped.

Boggs rolled a cigarette while he talked. His information came in short, jerky sentences. "Don Bandido's been taken by Sheriff Alden. Out on bail—"

"Hell!" Larsen swore. "When did this happen?"

"The Don's out on bail, I'm tellin' yuh," Boggs continued, hardly noticing the interruption, "walkin' the streets of Oreana Wells. Makin' friends with everybody. Alden got him four days ago—I dunno how. Alden collected the thousand yuh offered for his capture, then used it to bail him out—"

A lurid stream of profanity issued from Larsen's lips. His face worked angrily and for a few minutes he could do nothing but curse savagely at his luck. Even the Texans gave him a wide berth and didn't speak for several minutes until Larsen had cooled down.

"Well, what yuh aimin' to do about it?" Dogger Mathews ventured at last. "We ain't earnin' our pay standin' here an' listenin' to you paint the atmosphere! If I had my way, I'd be for cleanin' out the whole Double-A crowd to once!" Dogger had plenty of nerve, if nothing else. Like all his breed, he craved action from morning until night.

Larsen glowered at the speaker. "The last time you boys met them Double-A cow-willies an' Don Bandido I didn't see yuh doin' nothin'," he sneered coldly, once more getting his feelings under control.

Dogger laughed harshly. "If I remember correct," he stated insultingly, "it was you that advised us to quit the fight an' get our hands in the air. You wasn't showin' up as any whirlwind yourself 'bout that time!"

"What in hell could I do?" Larsen raged. "The Don had me covered. I had to call yuh off, or he'd 'a' plugged me."

"Exactly." Dogger laughed coolly. "I wouldn't have rubbed it in that-a-way, Hawk, only yuh was doin' a heap of talkin' 'bout our shortcomin's." The other Texans were laughing openly at Larsen's discomfiture now, as Dogger added, "Start shootin' orders, boss. We'll carry 'em out, or die a-tryin'!"

Here Blackie Boggs broke in. "I reckon I've already started the ball a-rollin', boss," he informed Larsen. "I didn't see Don Bandido in town when I was there, but they was plenty folks to tell me all about him comin' in every day. He hadn't come in yet, but if he ain't lost his nerve he'll be in Oreana Wells this afternoon—"

"What do yuh mean?" Larsen scowled.

"As I was leavin' town," Boggs explained, "I met one of the punchers from the Rafter-H. I knew he'd have to pass the Double-A on his way home, so I sent word in your name that anytime Don Bandido an' the three waddies yuh had the run-in with the other night wanted any action, they could have it. I said some of us would be in town to-day—"

"Yuh damn' fool," Larsen exclaimed, "what did yuh do that for?" Then his voice changed. "After all, I guess mebbe we might as well have a showdown right to once an' get it over with—"

"Sure," Dogger put in, "Blackie had the

right idea. We'll get the whole matter settled to-day if them Double-A fellers will come to town."

Larsen spoke with sudden decision. "All right, boys, get your horses," he said to the Texans. "Blackie, you go along with 'em."

"Ain't you comin'?" Dogger asked.

Larsen shook his head. "Nope, I'll wait here for yuh to bring back the good news. With Blackie, yuh'll have six guns. That oughta be enough. I ain't none too popular these days, an' I don't want to get mixed in no gunfights. I gotta pretend to be a good citizen. I'm payin' you fellers to lift the Don's scalp. Let's see that yuh earn your pay!"

There was nothing more to be said. The men knew that it wasn't fear that held Hawk Larsen back. Larsen's courage was beyond criticism, regardless of his other faults. It was as he had said: he couldn't afford at this time to become involved in any fighting, if he wanted to retain such small respect as Oreana Wells held for him.

Five minutes later his men were mounted and tearing along the trail in the direction of town, each one resolved to do his utmost to wipe out the Double-A punchers. Ringing in their ears was Larsen's last order, "Get Don Bandido!"

The cowboy from the Rafter-H Ranch had just departed from the Double-A, after delivering Blackie Boggs' message. As it happened, Alden, Big Dan Miller and Ted Stephens were out on the range some place, and the Rafter-H man had talked to Cal. Cal had come bursting into the bunkhouse with the news. Don, Monte, and Tige listened with interest while Cal talked.

"So they're throwin' down the gauntlet, eh?" Don said slowly, when Cal had finished. "Well, it had to come sooner or later. We can't ignore a challenge like that—"

"Believe me, cowboy," Monte exulted, light of battle glowing in his eyes, "I ain't intendin' to ignore it. I'm goin' to Oreana Wells if I has to go alone!"

"A fat chance you got leavin' us behind," came in scornful tones from Tige.

Cal was laughing softly and replenishing empty loops in his cartridge belt. "I'm sure glad it's comin' this way," he drawled. "I was gettin' plumb afraid that we'd scared Larsen an' his Tehanners off."

"I wonder," Don said, "how many of 'em they'll be."

"Well, let's see—" Cal counted on his fingers. "They's Hawk Larsen makes one—his five Texans brings it up to six—Then they's another feller works for Larsen by the name of Blackie Boggs. He's the one that sent the message out by that Rafter-H puncher. That makes seven, countin' him."

"And they's four of us," Don answered. "Heavy odds, but still I reckon we can—" The sentence was left unfinished.

"Hell, Don," Cal exclaimed loyally, "you can take care of two or three yourself—"

Don's laugh cut him short. "You're kinda overestimatin', cowboy. I ain't one of these here miracle men an' I ain't no fancy-shootin' hombre. Just plain lead-throwin', that's me. Anyway, I don't guess we'll have any trouble handlin' them. Mebbe they all won't come. It wouldn't surprise me none if Larsen himself stayed at the ranch an' left the heavy work to his hands—"

" 'Course, we could wait," Monte proposed, "an' get Big Dan an' Ted to go in with us, only I'm afraid that the sheriff might spoil all the fun if he got wind of the affair."

Cal nodded. "Yeah, that's the trouble. Well, we better get goin'."

A few minutes later the men were in the saddle and, with Don and Cal riding ahead, started for the road that ran past the house.

They had just reached the ranch house when Don saw Tony on the veranda. She beckoned for him to stop.

"Ride on ahead slow, fellers," Don said. "I'll catch up with yuh in a few minutes. Miss Tony wants to see me."

He was ascending the porch steps when the cowboys reached the road and swung their mounts in the direction of Oreana Wells.

There were few preliminaries. Tony wanted to know where he was going. The two stood facing each other near the door.

"Why—we wasn't goin' no place in particular," Don answered, evading the girl's questioning eyes. "We didn't have much to do, so I suggested that we ride in an' see if there was any mail for any of us."

Tony looked steadily at him. "That's fine," she said at last. "I feel just like taking a ride. I'll go with you."

Don looked uncomfortable. "Aw, shucks, Tony, yuh better not. We'll be ridin' hard. Yuh see—yuh see, we don't want to be away too long.

A long silence. Tony laughed nervously. Then, "Don, look at me."

Slowly the man's eyes came around to her face, and then he knew Tony was aware that he was lying. "I'm—I'm sorry, Tony—" he stammered.

"Don," she said quietly, "I know where you're going. I stopped that Rafter-H man when he was leaving. He told me—"

The man breathed a long sigh of relief. At least he wouldn't have to leave her with a lie on his lips. "Yuh understand how it is, then, don't yuh, girl?" he smiled confidently.

But she had no answering smile for him. Something of a gray frightened pallor had settled about her face now. "I don't understand—that's just the trouble, Don."

"Why, when a man gets a challenge of that kind, he simply can't back out."

"If you loved me, you wouldn't say that. Don't go, Don. Go after Cal and the others and bring them back. The thought of more killing terrifies me. I can still see Ed Masters—"

"I killed Masters to save you," the man broke in. "Don't you see that this amounts to the same thing? With Larsen at large there's no telling what he might do—"

"He might kill you," the girl interrupted. "Either that, or you'll kill him. I couldn't—couldn't marry a—a killer. When you killed Masters it was different. That was self-defense. It couldn't be avoided. This new affair can."

Range-bred as she was, Tony was at heart purely feminine, with all of a woman's fear and dislike of violence. Still they talked on, the man's tones mingling with the girl's pleading, unreasoning voice.

Don's face was twisted with pain as he tried to make her understand the stand he was taking. "Yuh see, Tony girl, I want everything settled before we're married. The Arrow-M rightly belongs to me, an' I intend to have it. I can't come to you penniless. I'm doing this for you—"

"But there's our happiness to consider first," the girl protested wildly. "That comes before all else. Don, Don, listen to me—" She caught at his arm and tried to draw him to her, but he resisted. "Don, it's not necessary for you to have the Arrow-M. Let Larsen keep it. We needn't stay here in this country. We could go to my father. He'd take us in gladly—"

She stopped short at the look of scorn in the man's pale face. "Yes, he pro'bly would take us in," Don answered sternly, "but only on your account. Do you expect that he'd have any respect for me?" Contempt in his voice now. "No! No more than I'd have for any feller that run away from his duty. And he'd pro'bly hate me—an' mebbe you, too, for marryin' a man with a yellow streak—"

"But, Don—" a sob shook her voice, "—even so, can't you do this for me? I've never asked you to do anything else, and I never will again—" she broke off, unable to continue. Tears were welling into the dark eyes.

The lines in the man's face softened as he looked at her. "I can't, Tony. Ask me anything else—but not that. It's too much." His hands went out in a supplicating gesture, then fell helpless at his side. "Won't you see it? This challenge is aimed directly at me. With Larsen the Double-A outfit is a secondary consideration to be taken care of after I'm out of the way. It's me they want to wipe out. I'm practically certain that it was Larsen killed my father. Would you ask me to forget that—forget that and run off, leaving *my* fight on the shoulders of Tige and Cal and Monte?"

Tony shook her head. "I only know I

love you, Don," she replied, her lips quivering, "but if you can't do what I ask, everything between us is finished." Her voice sounded flat, cold now. "I guess —it's plain that you don't care—"

"Girl—girl, don't say that!" he cried. His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "I suppose, bein' a woman, yuh just can't understand. I can only say that I'm doin' right, and ask you to trust to my judgment. Won't you tell me to go—and smile when yuh say it?"

The girl's head dropped at his words "I think," she answered in a low small voice, "that everything is over between us."

Then she turned and walked slowly toward the door.

The man stood gazing after her as she passed into the house, desperate entreaty in his eyes. "I reckon—then—it won't make so much difference—if I don't come back—"

He turned swiftly with sudden decision and ran down the steps. A moment more and he was in the saddle and tearing recklessly down the road in pursuit of the three Double-A punchers who were now some distance ahead.

Tony rushed from the door. "Don!" she called, "Oh, Don—I can't let you go like that. I didn't understand— Come back to me!"

But the man was already beyond hearing. Tony stood gazing after him until his form grew smaller and smaller, then suddenly blurred before her eyes.

A quarter of an hour later Sheriff Alden, accompanied by Big Dan and Ted Stephens, arrived at the horse corral to find Tony, almost hysterical now, saddling her horse. The gun swung at her waist called for an explanation. It came, stammered out in broken sentences and between sobs, while the three men eyed her in speechless amazement.

"Hell's fire!" Alden swore, "I reckon if ye're a-goin' gunnin' for Hawk Larsen, girl, ye'll need some help. There, there, Tony, keep yore nerve. Them Texans won't lick our boys. Everythin'll be all right. C'mon, boys, we're fannin' tails for town. Let's go!"

CHAPTER X

Action at the Spotted Cayuse

DOGGER MATHEWS and his five companions rode straight to the Spotted Cayuse Saloon when they arrived in Oreana Wells. They dismounted, flipped reins over the hitching-rack and entered the saloon. It was the wrong hour for much trade, but a few patrons lounged at the long bar.

"Howdy, gents," the bartender greeted affably. "What yuh drinkin'?"

"Howdy, yerself!" Dogger growled reply. "We're drinkin' likker as usual—what did yuh think, sody-pop?"

The six men ranged themselves along the bar and downed their drinks. Then they swung around, eyes on the doorway, back to the bar.

"Where's Hawk to-day?" the bartender asked after a time, in an endeavor to be sociable.

Dogger turned and surveyed him with a long cold glance. "Larsen's out at the ranch," he answered frigidly. "Anythin' else you're curious about?"

The barkeeper backed away from the look in Dogger's eyes. "Hell, mister, I ain't nosin' into nobody's business," he replied. "Just thought it was funny that the hull outfit should come in without Hawk. He usually comes, too."

"The more swabs like you mind their own business, the better off they'll be!" Dogger snarled meaningly.

The man behind the bar had no answer for that. Again Dogger and his five men forcused their attention on the doorway.

Gradually it was borne in on the other patrons of the bar that the Arrow-M men were in an ugly mood. Something was evidently afoot. No one else ventured to approach them, and before long the gunmen had the greater part of the room to themselves. Even the bartender moved down to the far end where his other customers had congregated.

Left thus to themselves, Dogger and his companions began conversing in low tones.

"The Don an' them Double-A fellers oughta be comin' in right soon," one of the Texans commented.

"Yeah," from Blackie Boggs, "if I know them Double-A rannies, they won't waste no time gettin' here after they've talked to that Rafter-H puncher I sent the message by. We can expect 'em 'most any minute now."

"I was just wonderin'," Dogger speculated, "if mebbe the sheriff was there an' mighta put a stop to 'em comin'."

"It might be the sheriff'll come in with 'em," another of the Texans observed.

Dogger's thin lips tightened. "If that happens, they're liable to be electin' a new sheriff in this town to-morrow," he snarled. "I never did have no use for these hombres what's allus preachin' law an' order. We might as well make a good clean-up while we're at it an' sweep away all Hawk's troubles to oncet!" He turned to Blackie Boggs. "You're sure they'll come here?"

"They ain't no doubt of it," Blackie returned. "The Spotted Cayuse is allus the first place the Double-A heads for when they hit town. It's a sort of headquarters for 'em."

Dogger nodded with satisfaction. "All right, they ain't nothin' for us to do but to wait. Them fellers outsmarted us the last time by waitin' for us to start the ball rollin'. We don't want nothin' like that to happen again. Be ready when they come, an' then let 'em have it! Just give 'em time to reach for their guns so it'll look like a fair fight."

Fifteen minutes passed. The other men in the saloon were too far away to hear what was being said, but from the looks on the faces of the six men who stood watching the door, it was no difficult matter for them to deduce that the Arrow-M men were gunning for somebody. Further reasoning along the same lines brought the idea that Don Bandido and his friends were probably the prospective victims. Hawk Larsen had shown himself too vindictive for any other conclusion to have been reached.

One by one the customers departed from the saloon, until at last the six gunmen had the place to themselves, except for the bartender, who was trying to appear at ease on a high stool at the far end of the room. Five more minutes dragged by. Still the six men waited, their backs to the bar, hands ready to dart to six-shooters. Occasionally one of them moved to light a cigarette, or adjust holster nearer the front, but that was all.

The silence grew almost unbearable. It almost seemed that all noise had ceased even in the street outside. A strange sort of tension suspended all movements and life.

Dogger Mathews moistened his dry lips with the end of his tongue. Beads of perspiration were standing out on Blackie Boggs' forehead now.

"I wish they'd hurry up," Blackie commenced nervously. "I don't like—"

"What yuh drinkin', gents?" came the interruption in a low cool voice.

"We ain't drinkin'," Dogger rasped savagely, as he swung around. Then he stopped short, jaw dropping. Facing him, *from behind the bar,* were Don, Cal, Monte and Tige! A door back of the bar, leading into an adjoining room, told how they had gained this position. It had been a simple matter to enter from the rear.

The other five gunmen, thinking the voice to be the bartender's, had left the matter to Dogger and were still watching the door.

Dogger ripped out an oath—reached for his gun as he backed away from the bar. Cal's right hand darted down. Without drawing, Cal tilted his holster and pulled the trigger. The lead slug passed through leather, splintered the front of the wooden bar and tore viciously into Dogger's body!

The tall Texan sat down abruptly and with sudden force, a look of stunned surprise spreading over his features. Even as he fell his gun came out—spat a vivid stream of orange fire that shattered the long saloon mirror back of Don.

By this time the other five men had pivoted, hands darting to hips. Before they could draw, they found themselves covered by guns held in the steady hands of the Double-A men. Only Blackie Boggs, with the courage born of desperation, tried to complete the move. His gun flashed up. Monte's six-gun belched lead

and flame. Blackie staggered back with a smashed shoulder, the weapon dropping from his nerveless fingers.

Through the blue drifting smoke, as the other gunmen elevated their hands, came Cal's laughing voice. "You Tehanners gimme a laugh. You look like yuh was waitin' for Ol Man Trouble to arrive, an' then wasn't ready when he got here!"

"Funny lookin' bunch, ain't they?" Monte commented. "They musta been plumb cuckoo to think they could come to town an' lay in wait for us, without nobody spillin' the beans when they arrived!"

Tige looked sorrowful. "Not one shot did I get," he lamented. "Such luck I never did see. Shucks! I thought you fellers was fighters!"

"Hell! We know when we're licked," one of the Texans growled. "Let's quit talkin' an' see can somebody get a doctor. Dogger's hit bad!"

"That's the idea," Don put in, "we don't want nobody dyin' if we can help it. They's been enough killin'."

Unconsciously he was voicing Tony's sentiments. He'd been in a sort of daze ever since leaving the girl, and if it hadn't been for Cal he would have entered the Spotted Cayuse by the front door, which would have meant certain death. As a matter of fact, he wasn't caring whether he lived or not. Tony's words had taken the heart out of him. Now he came to his senses at the sight of Dogger Mathews sprawled on the floor. The man was groaning with pain, and his face was ghastly white.

There came a sudden rush at the door. In a moment the saloon was crowded with people attracted by the noise of the shots and the rumors which already were plentiful in Oreana Wells.

Don motioned to the four uninjured Texans. "Somebody take these fellers in charge an' hold 'em until the sheriff comes to town," he ordered. "I'll appreciate it if somebody else will run for a doctor."

Several men jumped to do his bidding. Two square tables were placed together and blankets spread on them. This made a bed upon which to place Dogger until the arrival of the doctor. Don, himself, helped lift the gunman's long form. Blackie Boggs was led to a nearby chair into which he dropped, moaning with pain. The other four gunmen were taken away to the jail to await Alden's arrival.

The saloon was noisy with the excited voices of the crowd now. Cal was watching Don curiously. "What's the matter, cowboy," he asked, "is somethin' wrong? Ever since yuh was talkin' to Miss Tony yuh been actin' like yuh was half asleep. Did yuh get some bad news?"

Don smiled wistfully. "Yeah—kinda, Cal. It'll pass off, though, I reckon."

An awkward silence from Cal now. He suspected that there was something between Tony and Don, although nothing had been said. "Shucks, boy, don't get upset over nothin' now! Everythin' goin' to come out all right."

Don groped for his hand. "Sure—sure, Cal. I know. At that, I wasn't so much asleep that I missed the fact yuh saved my life. It was *me* Dogger was throwin' down on."

"Aw, gosh! That wasn't nothin'," Cal denied modestly. "I just plugged Dogger on gen'ral principles. He mighta been pickin' on any of us— "

"Just the same," Don persisted earnestly, "I ain't forgettin' that yuh've come to to my aid before this. If things break right for me, I'll be runnin' the Arrow-M before long—but I already told yuh about that. Anyway, I'll be needin' a foreman. The job is yours if yuh'll take it—"

The arrival of the doctor interrupted further speech. Blackie Boggs was given scant consideration. His wound, although painful, was bleeding freely and wasn't so serious as Dogger's. The doctor looked dubious as he examined Dogger.

"A long hard siege ahead of this man," he announced finally.

"He'll get well, though, won't he, doctor?" Don inquired.

"Oh, he'll pull through all right," the doctor assured, "but he'll be in bed a long time."

Whisky was procured and forced between Dogger's lips. The man groaned and opened his eyes. He grimaced with

pain as his eyes fell on the Double-A men. "Hell, fellers, yuh outsmarted me again, didn't yuh?" he grinned weakly, no particular animosity in the tones. "I guess ol' Dogger better turn over a new leaf. His noodle don't work like it used to."

"Listen, Dogger," Don put in, speaking earnestly, "you know who I am, don't yuh?"

The man nodded slowly. "Sure, you're Don March. Your pappy used to own Larsen's Arrow-M spread—"

"How did Larsen get control of the Arrow-M?" Don interrupted. "Wasn't that will forged? Did Larsen kill my father?"

"I can't tell yuh about that," Dogger returned. "From things that Hawk an' Blackie have let drop sometimes, I allus suspected it, though. Ask Blackie. Him an' Hawk's pretty thick—"

Don swung around to Blackie Boggs who sat near and had heard the questions. "How about it, Blackie?" he questioned.

Blackie groaned. "I don't know nothin' about it. Yuh can't expect a feller to talk when he's hit bad like this—"

"Yuh ain't hit bad, an' you're goin' to talk," Don broke in sternly. "Yuh better think again, Blackie. You're comin' up for trial one of these days soon. Whether yuh serve a long sentence or not depends on how yuh talk now. For all I know it was *you* killed my father. I reckon I'll put in a charge to that effect against yuh!"

"Nope—don't say that. It wasn't me." Sudden fear was in Blackie's eyes now.

"Who was it?" Don's voice pursued relentlessly. "I know yuh was hangin' around with Hawk them days. Yuh know somethin' about it."

"All right," Blackie consented sullenly at last. "I'll tell what I know. Hawk Larsen killed Dick March. Got him out on the range one morning an' then shot him when he wasn't lookin'. I didn't know that, though, for a long time, until one night Hawk got drunk an' spilled the whole story to me. The will was a forgery."

Don didn't wait to hear more. A sudden rage against Hawk Larsen welled in his breast. For the moment Tony, everything, was forgotten. He had but one thought in mind, that one thought to avenge his father! Then Don's brain cleared. He'd have to move carefully. It wouldn't do to have Cal and the others at his heels when he once more met Hawk Larsen. This was something that had to be settled man to man, with no outside interference.

Don turned back to Blackie. "Where's Hawk Larsen now?" he asked quietly.

"Out to the Arrow-M, waitin' for us to brink news of your death," Blackie confessed reluctantly.

Don nodded unconcernedly, then cast a glance at Cal and the other two punchers. They were interested in watching the doctor as he worked over Dogger.

A short time later when Cal turned to speak to Don he discovered that he was gone.

"Lookin' for Don?" one of the crowd asked. "He went tearin' down the road a coupla minutes ago, hell-bent for election!"

"That means," Cal said a few minutes later to Monte, "that Don has gone after Larsen—wants him to himself. Still, I don't know but what we should be there with him."

"Come on, fellers, let's go," from Tige. "Larsen might slip somethin' over on the Don, an' we wouldn't want Hawk to escape."

As the three cowboys ran outside to their ponies, they saw Tony, Sheriff Alden, Big Dan and Ted Stephens just dismounting at the hitch-rack.

Cal explained in a few terse sentences what had happened and where Don had gone.

Then the seven riders again mounted and hastily got under way, heading along the trail taken by Don but a short time before.

Tony was dry-eyed now, but her face was pale and showed evidence of much suffering in the time that had elapsed since Don's departure from the Double-A. It wasn't long before she had urged her fleet-footed little cowpony up ahead and was leading the other riders.

CHAPTER XI

Conclusion

DON pushed his pony to the utmost. Mile after mile flashed by beneath the flying feet of the speeding horse. It seemed that the staccato drumming of the animal's hoofs was forming sentences, beating them into his brain. "Kill Larsen—kill Larsen —kill Larsen—" Over and over the words recurred in a sort of endless rhythm that went on and on. Don was seeing red now.

Forgotten were Tony's words. Don could think of nothing else except that he wanted Larsen's death—regardless of consequences.

It wasn't long before the ranch buildings of the Arrow-M hove into view. It was all familiar to Don now, as though he had never been away.

Approaching the buildings, Don glimpsed Larsen's figure as the man slipped into the bunkhouse and slammed the door behind him. Straight past the big ranch house Don sped. As he neared the bunkhouse a rifle barrel was suddenly jammed through the window in one side of the building. From the muzzle leaped a sharp jet of crimson flame. Don felt the breeze of the bullet as it sang a song of death past his head.

There was no hesitation now. Guiding the horse with one hand while he reached for his six-shooter with the other, Don swerved his mount so suddenly that the movement almost swept the sure-footed little cowpony off its feet. Again Larsen missed, and again he sent a stream of red fire in the direction of the rider.

Don felt the pony falter—stumble to its knees. It dropped suddenly. Don slipped feet from the stirrups just in time to avoid being pinned beneath the body of the falling horse as it crashed to the ground.

In an instant he was on his feet, steady, gun in hand. Bullets from Larsen's rifle were singing about him like angry wasps. Then Don was running toward the closed door at the end of the building—out of range of the window now.

As he approached the door a splinter suddenly bulged outward. The bullet from Larsen's gun winged far to one side. Unhesitatingly Don continued relentlessly on, hurled his weight against the bolted door. It refused to give.

"Come out, murderer!" Don called. There was an unfamiliar snarl in the words. Don didn't recognize his own voice.

From within the bunkhouse, silence. Then two more slugs ripped viciously through the heavy plank door. The bullets flew wide.

Don laughed grimly. He knew he had his man now.

"You're wastin' lead, Larsen," he called again. "Come out an' fight like a man. I'm ready for yuh—"

He stepped back several paces and waited. Larsen must be reloading.

Suddenly the bunkhouse door was flung open and Larsen was framed in the entrance, both guns flaming!

Don tilted the gun at his hip. Just as he was about to shoot, Tony's beseeching face appeared before his eyes. It was only fancy, but for a moment Don thought the girl was really there. Then his brain cleared. The vision vanished and he realized that his senses were tricking him. Still he hesitated to shoot.

Something hit his shoulder a staggering smash, swinging him half around. He realized he was hit. Again his gun flashed up. He thumbed two shots rapidly.

Larsen's legs suddenly gave way and he crashed to the ground! Don laughed crazily as his eyes focused on his enemy, down at the hips now like a great sprawling frog—swirling powder-smoke all about the picture.

Bracing himself on his left hand, Larsen raised the gun in his right. Again Don fired. The supporting arm crumpled, let Larsen down on one shoulder.

Gritting his teeth with pain, but game to the last, Larsen—sprawled full-length now—raised the gun in his uninjured hand.

Right then something told Don to throw in a finishing shot. The words were coming a second time: "Kill Larsen—kill Lar-

sen—kill—kill—kill—" Again Tony's face appeared before him.

There came a vivid orange flash. Something like white-hot steel seared the side of Don's head. He staggered back, weaved about uncertainly on weakening legs. His consciousness was slipping. Dimly through the blinding red haze of smoke and blood, Don caught the savage gleam of triumph in Larsen's eyes. The man was raising his arm for a final shot.

Even as he fell, Don sent a last bullet at his opponent. There was a thundering in his ears now, mingled with the crescendo drumming of horses' hoofs—Tony's frantic voice calling his name—

Then quite suddenly everything went black, Don felt his open mouth pressed against the dust, and blessed oblivion engulfed him.

When Don regained consciousness he found himself stretched full-length in the shade of a group of scrub-oaks where he had been carried. His head was pillowed in Tony's lap. He didn't open his eyes at once.

"There, there, girl," Alden was consoling in his booming tones, "don't take on so. Don's all right—"

Then Cal's voice broke in, something of awe in the tones. "Can yuh beat it? Both of Larsen's arms an' legs busted, but not a shot in his body. The Don sure must have been shootin' cool-like, savin' him for a trial that-a-way—"

"Don isn't a killer," from Tony.

"Sure—sure, I know," came Cal's bewildered voice. "Only when a feller's facin' a killer it's natural that he should try to wipe him out as soon as possible, an' regardless—"

"But, golly, what a battle that musta been!" Tige was saying.

Then Monte's reply, "I'd 'a' give my right eye to see it!"

Don felt the mouth of a flask placed against his lips, then the scalding sensation of raw whiskey in his throat. He opened his eyes. "Larsen," he muttered dazedly, "I—I didn't shoot to kill—Tony." The girl's face was swimming before his eyes. Suddenly everything cleared and he saw them all standing around him.

"Oh, honey-man," Tony was saying softly, "I know it. You're wonderful!"

He smiled faintly up at her. "Where am I hit? Is it serious?"

"Shucks, no!" Alden answered. "One of Larsen's bullets parted your hair on the side. That's what knocked yuh out. Yuh sure took plenty time coming to. A slug passed through the fleshy part of the shoulder, too, but it's a clean wound. Yuh'll be right as a trivet in a week or so. We're takin' Larsen in to a doctor in a few minutes. He's confessed to everything. The Arrow-M is yours."

"Yeah," Monte put in, "an' he owned up that Masters was workin' under his order when he held up the coach for that gold, too. In fact, Larsen's plumb scared an' he sure talked free. All the rustlin' an' hold-ups you was blamed for was Larsen's work."

Tony was gesturing to Alden now. The old sheriff looked puzzled, then a twinkle crept into his eyes. He cleared his throat. "I reckon us boys had better go see that Larsen don't escape," he suggested. "We'll leave Don here with Tony. She'll take proper care of him."

The men commenced moving away. Only Tige was slow to catch the idea. "Huh! What's got into you fellers? How in time can Larsen escape when he's got all his arms an' laigs busted. A coupla us ought to stay here anyway, in case Don needs movin'—"

That was as far as he got. Tige felt himself seized violently on either side by Cal and Monte and borne rapidly away.

"Of all the dumb rannies," Monte voiced disgustedly, "you take the cake, Tige! Can't yuh see them two has got a lot to say to each other?"

Still Tige didn't comprehend. "Well, what of it? Ain't we friends of both of 'em?"

Cal sighed deeply. "Monte called the turn," he said softly to Tige. "Yuh sure are dumb. Don't yuh never figger anythin' out for yourself?—They's goin' to be a weddin' before long—"

The idea struck Tige with sudden force. A great light dawned. "A weddin'?—Oh, yes, a weddin'—" Then he

straightened indignantly. "Well, you waddies ain't tellin' me nothin'. Think I ain't got eyes to see?—I was just stayin' behind to ask 'em what they wanted for a present!"

Tony and Don were alone. Her hand fluttered down and touched the bandage about his head. Instantly, it seemed, the throbbing pain vanished. He settled his head comfortably in her lap, laughed happily.

"Oh, Don," she breathed softly, "I understand at last why you had to go. You were right—so right—I know now——"

"But you weren't wrong," he insisted, losing himself in her dark eyes, "you weren't wrong, Tony girl. That's why I was shootin' straight, an' not killin'—" There was a singing note in the words.

"I know now, Don—that you couldn't do anything else but shoot straight—ever—You don't know any other way."

The man's arms went up and drew down her eager lips to meet his own. "Always for you, Tony—always for you," he answered softly, holding her close.

LOG CABIN IS MEMORIAL TO MOTHER OF LINCOLN

THE cabin where Nancy Hanks gave to the world her great son, Abraham Lincoln, is enshrined in a granite temple and belongs to the United States Government; but the cabin where she herself was born disappeared, and no one on earth remembered or suspected its location.

In the cold of a bitter Winter, 1783-4, at the end of one or the beginning of the other year, this child of a mother who was under forty-five when the third United States census was made in the Summer of 1810, and who probably had not passed her nineteenth birthday when her baby was born, first woke to the harsh and cruel realities of an unfriendly world,

President Lincoln did not know where his mother was born, and he had not much inclination to inquire. He knew that his father, Thomas Lincoln, was born in Rockingham County, in the Shenandoah Valley, and, like nearly all the information that he had obtained through his father concerning his family history on the paternal side, this was correct. But all the Hankses of his mother's generation known to him were dead before he made any investigation, and the next generation was born in Kentucky.

Recently William E. Barton wrote to the Clerk of Hampshire County for records and could find only two. Joseph Hanks had a good title to his land, albeit the land was not paid for in full, and he mortgaged his farm in March, 1784, for a pitiful sum, paid by a thrifty Pennsylvania German neighbor, Peter Putman, and the whole Hanks family hastened away to Kentucky.

He found the foundation stones of the home of Joseph Hanks, and the spring from which his family obtained water. It was above the forks and between the forks of Mike's Run, a "drain," or as the deeds called it a "drean," of Patterson's Creek.

Later, an invited company gathered at the site of the cabin of Joseph Hanks for final investigation and certification. Old deeds and patents had given clearly the location of the farm. George Terry had the patent from Lord Fairfax, and he assigned it to Peter Hartman, who in 1781 assigned it to Joseph Hanks. Between it and Patterson's Creek, and including the mouth of Mike's Run, lay the farm of Peter Putnam. When Peter died his original farm and the Hanks' addition were divided to secure the dower rights. Peter left a good estate, including two barrels of whiskey, one of which was reserved for "use at the sail" and the other at the said sale brought, including barrel, $4.76. Peter's coffin cost $5, which was a rather high price.

The description of the divided farm, by its references to the forks of the stream, helped to show the location of the cabin. By digging a few inches below the surface, the corners of the stone foundation of the cabin were found in place.

At a dinner in the evening, in Keyser, an organization was formed with instructions to procure papers of incorporation and secure an option on the site with expectation of building on the place. The site is five miles up Patterson's Creek to the bridge of Mike's Run, and one and three-fourths miles up the Run, from the village of Burlington, Mineral County, West Virginia.

The Branding of Senator Keith

By
Albert William Stone

When cowmen wander off the home-range they are in danger of most anything from an automobile to a violet-eyed girl driver. Watch your step, cowboys!

I

SENATOR Keith came to his senses—partly. Voices rose from the confusion of sound that assailed his ears, and the snort of automobile horns reminded him that he was in Denver. He opened his eyes and stared straight into a pair of violet optics that would have charmed the meanness out of a lobo. Senator Keith smiled vaguely.

"Are you hurt much?"

The violet eyes were fairly brimming with sympathy and concern. Senator Keith's smile was a twisted thing, because his jaw was aching amazingly. Moreover, there was a crick somewhere in his back, not far from where his shoulderblades were resting on the hard sidewalk. He was hurt, he felt; but in the face of the startled concern in those heavily-fringed violet eyes all the king's horses could not have dragged the admission out of him.

"Naw!" he said gallantly. "Take more'n this tuh hurt me."

The Senator's diction was as pronouncedly cow-country as his drawl was unmistakably southern. Instantly he heard excited comment buzzing all around.

"Cowboy!"

"Reg'lar puncher, sure enough."

"Look how brown his face is!"

A pair of blue-clad legs, ending in shoes whose soles were incredibly thick, crooked suddenly. The heavy bass of the policeman's voice challenged the Senator's eardrums.

"Ambulance'll be here in a minute. Just lay still, cowboy. Don't try to move."

But Senator Keith made a movement in spite of the injunction, grimaced with the sudden pain it brought him, and settled back to the hard sidewalk. His brain was clearing rapidly. His eyes blinked at the brilliantly-polished shoes of the officer.

"Ambulance?" he muttered. "I don't need no ambulance."

"Yes, you do, too."

The policeman was bending over again. "You're bad hurt, cowboy, if I'm any judge. This young lady's car knocked you kicking."

The last vestige of Senator Keith's mental fog cleared away. So he'd been knocked over by an automobile, had he? Hell! He twisted over, and found himself looking into the violet eyes again. This time his gaze took in the rest of her face—delicately arched eyebrows, a wide, sympathetic mouth parted to show a double row of even white teeth, a softly-rounded chin, a nose whose nostrils were dilated widely, and brown hair escaping in tendrils from under a natty blue turban.

Senator Keith sat up suddenly, and the girl smiled in relief. A cowboy who could sit up like that couldn't be so badly hurt after all. He discovered, now, that she was kneeling on the sidewalk beside him. His changed position brought them eye to eye. A closely packed crowd hemmed them in.

"You're all right now, aren't you?" she inquired anxiously.

The distant clang of a bell and a sudden anticipatory shifting of the feet around them cut in on the affirmative answer that rose to his lips. He stifled a groan. Instantly she bent closer to him.

"What is it?"

"Listen," he said rapidly, in so low a tone that only she could distinguish his words. "I don't wanna go tuh no hospital. An' I'm afraid I can't walk good right now. Can't you fix it?"

Milling around in the back of the Senator's mind was the recollection that he had been struck down by a car the girl was driving. The car must be somewhere near. If he went to a hospital he probably would see her no more. The Senator was a fast worker under most circumstances.

"Can't yuh git me out o' here?"

The violet eyes widened an instant then flashed comprehension. The girl scrambled hastily to her feet. The clanging was drawing nearer. She addressed the tall traffic policeman.

"I've just found out that this gentleman is a—a friend of mine," she said. "Will it be all right if I take him home, myself?"

"Why, I guess so," replied the officer, hesitatingly. "I guess it'll be all right, lady. Where do yuh live?"

"I mean—to *his* home."

Senator Keith's home was, as a matter of fact, several hundred miles away. Nevertheless he simulated acquiescence to the proposal. The girl was already helping him to his feet, and the policeman hoisted him by his other arm. The Senator kept his eyes almost closed, and permitted himself to be guided across the narrow edge of sidewalk and helped into the front seat of a touring car drawn up to the curb, the crowd parting for them. The door clanged shut behind him under the sharp impulse of the policeman's hand. The ambulance bell was very close now.

"Clear the way there!" shouted the policeman. "Lively!"

From under his half-closed lids, Senator Keith saw the girl appear at his other side and climb in beside him. He slumped convincingly against a soft arm, which was engaged in manipulating brake and gear levers. The engine purred in sudden life and the clutch went home. He could feel the car moving smoothly forward. It gathered speed.

The policeman was running alongside.

"Wait a second! I've gotta have your name—"

The girl said something, indistinguishable to the Senator above the noise of the motor. He thought he caught the word "Brown." The effort of getting into the car had cost him more than he would have cared to acknowledge — under any other circumstances. The pain in his back had become several pains; an infinite, clamoring variety of them, in fact, demanding attention. He slumped against the soft

arm even more heavily. The street was swimming before his vision, a veritable medley of dodging automobiles, pedestrians, tramway cars and a vista of tall buildings on either side.

"Where do you want to go?"

It was the girl's silvery voice speaking into his ear. Senator Keith became conscious of a desire to laugh. It was all so danged funny!

"Don't make no difference, I reckon," he muttered. The pains of his back, and the aching of his jaw, were fading magically. Was it the silvery voice that was working the miracle? A minute or two ago they were hurting like—

The confusing medley of visions disappeared as if wiped away with a sponge, the dodging automobiles, tramway cars, pedestrians and tall buildings cascading into each other like wheat into a hopper. The Senator's head fell back against the soft back cushion of the seat He was insensible. He slept as peacefully as if in his own bed at the Circle Bar—far away to the south—

How long he was out he didn't know. What did it matter, so long as he was permitted to awake and find himself propped against the softest arm in the whole, wide world? He could see a paved road pouring into the radiator, and a double line of trees making a continuous fringe that flowed past with satisfying rapidity. Now and then a red-tiled bungalow rode into sight, trembled in the foreground a moment and disappeared, its nest of green going with it. He opened his eyes wider.

Did he know that the blue-eyed girl had been stealing surreptitious glances at him as he slept? That she had noted, with approval, the height and breadth of his forehead, so white above the line of his hat band? That she had even gasped a little at the shapely lines of his mouth, and particularly at the even cleft in the center of his out-jutting chin? That she had had a wild impulse to run her fingers through his curly brown hair, and touch the edges of his long lashes that lay against the bronze of his cheek?

They were zooming along the road at the rate of forty-five miles an hour, a look at the meter told him. Far ahead loomed a blue mountain range, its slopes and sides flecked with the white of last winter's snows. The sun shone dazzlingly on the paved roadway.

He stirred and sat up. The message of the pains was not so sharp now. He ran his fingers through his hair and grinned at her.

"Looks like we're goin' somewhere," he remarked cheerfully. "I feel a lot better, ma'am. Where yuh takin' me?"

"Anywhere you say," she returned, looking as straight ahead as though she had not been devouring his pulchritude with her eyes for ten miles. "You wanted me to get you away from that ambulance, you know."

"I shore did. Ain't got no use fer the danged things, Miss—er—"

She did not enlighten him.

"—so this suits me right down to the ground," he finished lamely. "Them mountains is right purty."

"They are beautiful."

"I sort o' remember, now. I was startin' tuh cross th' street, wasn't I? An' then somethin' hit me a wallop between the ears, or thereabouts, an' I went sprawlin' like my hoss had stuck its foot into a badger hole."

"I hit you," she told him, guiding the car skilfully around a slower moving flivver lumbering along in the same direction, and coming back to the road without losing a fraction of their speed. "I was turning the corner, you know, and you walked right in front of the car. It wasn't my fault."

"I ain't sayin' it was," he chuckled, sitting up straighter. "I always was the doggonedest cuss fer blunderin' along like a steer headed fer a squeezer, beggin' yore pardon fer cussin', Miss. I wouldn't have no kick comin' if yuh'd 'a' busted both my legs an' a couple of my arms."

The car was entering Golden on a down grade. She smothered the throttle a trifle, and they coasted. Ahead was a sharp turn to the left. She brought the car to a full stop.

"Now where do you want to go?" she demanded coolly.

"Oh, anywheres." He waved his hand airily. "Any place suits me. It's early yet, ain't it?"

"It's ten o'clock," she responded, glancing at a small watch attached to her wrist. "If you're feeling all right again, perhaps we had better go back to Denver."

He relaxed hastily, and the corners of his lips drooped. Senator Keith had suddenly relapsed into a state of innocuous desuetude, whatever that is. He decided he had been exhibiting entirely too much energy.

"I'm purty shaky yet, Miss," he told her, his voice extraordinarily languid of a sudden. "Maybe yuh better take this here road to the left, an' drive up on Lookout. Maybe the air up there'll do me good."

Without a word she swung into the side road, and they sped smoothly up the grade toward the arched entrance to the Lookout Mountain road. In five minutes they had passed through it and had entered upon the climb. The higher they went, the better Senator Keith seemed to grow. The valley fell away from them as though depressed by a wind from the zenith, on their right. On the left the rugged slopes of the mountain hung over them with a threat of instantaneous crushing. With graceful skill the girl guided the car around other dusty travelers, negotiated hairpin curves and skirted the edges of the twisting highway in a way that would have brought gasps from a less timid passenger.

"This is great!" Senator Keith exclaimed presently. "I'm feelin' better every minnit!"

"I'm glad of that," she responded, her lips lifting slightly at the corners. "I thought for a moment I might have killed you, Mr.—"

"Keith," he supplied with alacrity. "Senator Keith, ma'am, from Chinnok, New Mexico."

"*Senator* Keith!" She turned on him a startled look. He laughed.

"Not a reg'lar senator, ma'am. Jes' the front name my folks wished on me when I was too young tuh kick about it."

"I—see!"

She brought the car to a pause at the brink of a precipitious cliff. A majestic view spread out before them, with the red roofs of the little village of Golden nestling in its nook far below. Castle Mountain, its top crowned with a network of buildings and observation platforms, loomed on the other side of an immense bowl. A huge palisade of granite fringed the horizon far to the left, and the smoke of Denver mingled with the haze fifteen miles to the eastward, the sunlight flashing sharply on distant gilded domes and windows.

"I'm dreadfully sorry about striking you!" she exclaimed impulsively, resting a hand on his arm. "I—almost fainted myself, Mr. Keith. I guess I wanted to get away from all those people and that policeman, as badly as you did."

"I'm shore glad yuh did," he stated frankly, grinning at her. " 'Tain't every day a cow hand like me gits a chance tuh go ridin' with a purty girl like you, Miss—"

She flushed, and he was instantly all contrition. Before she could utter the retort that trembled on her lips he forestalled her.

"I ain't aimin' tuh git fresh, Miss; honest I ain't. Only yuh gotta make allowances fer a man that's jest been knocked cookoo."

She relaxed under the warmth of his grin and the evident sincerity of his declaration. He noted, now, that she was dressed in a tailored suit of blue, matching her hat, and that she wore absurdly small and absurdly high-heeled shoes on absurdly small feet. In fact, she seemed to be absurdly small all over, now that he looked at her more critically. He stifled an impulse to seize her roughly and crush her in his muscular arms. She was the most thoroughly desirable young woman he had ever beheld in all his twenty-eight years of more or less strenuous life.

"I'd like tuh spend the day with yuh, if it ain't askin' too much," he suggested in a husky voice. "We could climb around, maybe, an' eat some lunch. There's a place up at the top, ain't there, where they sell sandwiches an' such? I gotta start back home tuh-night, yuh see. Most likely we won't never see each other ag'in, Miss."

She had been gazing at the superb scene spread out before them, her countenance

inscrutable. This cowboy from New Mexico was an irresistible young man with his handsome face and ingenuous behavior. His hat had been left behind in the excitement, but with his thick thatch of curly hair he would not miss it. He had gray eyes, just now eloquent in their grinning appeal. Her soberness broke under it. She, too, smiled.

"What time does your train leave?" she asked.

"Seven o'clock this evenin', Miss."

"Very well. We'll spend the day in the mountains, if you like. I'll drive you to the depot this evening in time to catch your train. Are you hungry?"

He was. A typical member of his profession, he was always hungry. In spite of the amorous tugging at his heart at this moment, he could have eaten two ordinary meals without pausing for breath. He told her so, and she laughed outright.

"We'll drive to the Pawkaska Lodge and get something to eat," she said. "You're sure you feel all right now, Mr. Keith?"

"As right as a double-rigged saddle at a rodeo," he assured her.

She started the car, and in five minutes they had reached the top of the mountain and pulled up before the rustically unpainted Pawkaska Lodge, built on the crest of Lookout Mountain in memory of the gentleman known to history as "Buffalo Bill." A full-bodied individual, clad in a broad-brimmed sombrero and white apron, stood in the doorway. An odor of food was wafted fragrantly to their hungry nostrils. The man in the apron grinned with professional hospitality.

" 'Light, folks, an' set," he said heartily. "Grub's about ready. If this ain't your honeymoon, you'll be wishin' it was before yuh git outside this here dinner I've got for yuh!"

Senator Keith glanced sidewise at the girl, and noted, with a thrill of satisfaction, that she was blushing and smiling at the same time.

II

CHINOOK, New Mexico, consists mainly of a drab wooden depot, Hi Hastings' general store, Bill Brayton's blacksmith shop, and seven—count 'em if you like—saloons.

But that isn't all there is to Chinook, by any means. Not by any manner of means!

Chinook has scenery. It has gobs of scenery. It sprawls in the very midst of the finest scenery in the world. It has so much scenery, in fact, that tourists riding through have been known to go into ecstasies over it.

Away over to the east, to begin with, there is that freak of mountain topography known locally as the "Indian's Basket." Twenty miles south of it, but as visible on a clear day as a similar object might be at a distance of four city blocks in any country but this particular part of New Mexico, is the famous "Lover's Leap." No lover ever leaped from it, so far as Chinook history reveals; but it would make a lovely spot for such a leap, should any lover take it into his head to enter a leaping marathon.

Then there is the sky. Evening is a good time to look at it. So is noon. So is midnight, when it isn't cloudy. So is morning—ah!

Senator Keith alighted from the Santa Fé plug at precisely twenty-two and a quarter minutes past six in the morning. The sun was already up, somewhere over the edge of the world, but thus far all that was visible of it was the "rosy fingered dawn" that a gentleman named Homer raved about a few thousand generations ago. For Chinook is surrounded by those indescribable New Mexico mountains, far flung, smiling, bathed most of the time in the brand of soft, joyous sunshine that only New Mexico can produce. And Chinook lay at the bottom of a huge, shallow bowl, garnished from center to edge with such beauty as the Master Hand delights to supply.

Mr. Keith's soul was in a fit mood to enjoy the matchless morning, all right. True to his traditions, he had made the journey from Denver in the day coach, and by rights should have been heavy-eyed with sleep. Especially with the ache in his joints still with him, and with a night of absolute sleeplessness behind him. Nevertheless, he was positively star-eyed as he

clambered stiffly down the steps, swinging his suit case after him, and was greeted by an elongated individual in patched overalls, hairy chaps, high-heeled boots with gleaming spurs jingling at their extremities, a checkered shirt, doe-skin vest, and incredibly wide-brimmed hat.

"You're jest in time," the elongated one asserted sourly. "Or maybe jest too late. What in hell—"

"Listen," broke in the Senator. "I've met a girl. The purtiest, sweetest, cutest jolliest, sensiblest girl yuh ever seen, Chuck. She's got a face like — like a flower. She's got a nose that beats any nose I ever seen, bar none. She's got hair like yuh read about in books. Her eyes, Chuck, beat this here sky yuh brag about so much by forty lengths. She's the trimmest, gentlest, best-winded—"

"Wait a minnit!" exclaimed Chuck, aghast. "Wait a minnit!"

"Well?"

The two men had crossed the plank platform to where a dusty flivver was drawn up, waiting. Mr. Keith was in the act of tossing his suitcase into the tonneau. He looked at his companion, who looked with equal intensity at him.

"You describin' a girl, or a hoss?"

"Didn't I *say* a girl?"

"That's what I thought," agreed Chuck. "But when yuh start describin' her wind an' limb—"

"I never mentioned her limb!" denied Senator Keith with emphasis. "As for her wind—"

"You did, too," declared Chuck, giving the crank an energetic heave and climbing into the driver's seat. "Anyhow, there's other things—"

"I met her yesterday," Mr. Keith went on, dreamily ignoring the other. "She hit me an awful wallop, right on the jaw, an' I went down fer the count. Then she throwed me into her car an' spirited me out o' town, away from the police, an' kept me in the mountains all day. Did yuh git that? All day!"

"Yeah," said Chuck, guiding the car up the main street of Chinook and heading for the open country to the west. "I gotcha the first time. I'm s'prised at yuh, though, gittin' drunk like that. Thought yuh never touched the stuff any more."

"I don't. I ain't had a drink in fourteen years, an' only one then. What the hell are yuh talkin' about?"

"What are *you* talkin' about?" demanded Chuck. "Yuh met up with a girl, says you. Then yuh start ravin' about gittin' walloped on the jaw, an' bein' took away into the mountains by this here female, an' th' police bein' after yuh, an' all. How could a gent have all that happen to him when he was plumb sober?"

Senator Keith laughed. "Reckon maybe I do sound sort o' loco," he acknowledged. "This here girl hit me with her automobile when I was crossin' the street; savvy? Then—"

He recited the tale. At times he became so incoherent that his companion had to break in for repeats. The car was speeding along a fenceless road, straight across the flat and rolling ground of the wide valley, headed apparently, straight for a range of mountains that rose higher and higher before them. Jack rabbits and cottontails scuttled briskly away from the road as they dashed along. Once a rattlesnake, crawling sluggishly through the dust, was caught fairly, rattling its dying agony under the wheels. The gramma grass of the region carpeted the wide acres endlessly, and the land was spotted with groups of white-faced Herefords, grazing.

"Yeah," said Chuck finally. "I reckon you was hit twice yesterday, all right. Once by the girl's car, an' once by the girl herself. She put yuh down fer the count, an' yuh stayed down. Now—"

"She was the finest—"

"Shore she was," said Chuck hastily. "But there's somethin' else, Sen. Slick Gleason says he's gonna work the stuff in the Tea Kettle bottoms right away."

"She's the—"

"What if she is!" shouted Chuck, suddenly exasperated. "Fer the love of Mike, git it out of yore system, an' lets git down tuh cases. What's this female's name, an' where does she live? Whats' her pedigree? Does she—"

He paused. The smitten one was star-

ing at him, his eyes popping with chagrin.

"Now what's the matter. Got the belly-ache?"

"Her name!" Mr. Keith breathed. "Holy smoke, Chuck! I—I—doggone if I didn't come away without finding it out!"

"Yuh don't say!" Chuck's tone was heavy with sarcasm. "Yuh—don't—say!"

"I hinted two or three times that I'd shore like tuh know her name, but she sort o' held out on me."

"Dodged the rope, did she? Well, now you listen tuh me a spell. There's fourteen hundred head of our Herefords down in the Tea Kettle bottoms, a lot of 'em without any brands on 'em. Then there's them brush steers Pete Lantry drove up from Texas last year. They ain't been branded at all."

"We branded some of 'em last fall."

"A few of 'em," agreed Chuck. "Anyhow, Slick Gleason's fixin' tuh work 'em over right now. Does that sink intuh yore bean, Mr. Lothario?"

"He can't do it." Mr. Lothario seemed to be emerging from his trance at last, and his jaw was hardening. "We never do any workin' an' brandin' until May. This is only April. The critters ain't shed enough yet."

"Jest what I told Slick," said Chuck warmly. "But he's all worked up over the arrival of the new owner of the Bar X; savvy? He's due to arrive most any time now. Slick says he wants his stuff over the river when he gits here, all branded an' ready fer shippin' if the new boss wants tuh do any shippin'."

"Well, he can't take any of that stuff over the river ontil they've went through my chute. They've gotta be checked an' tallied, careful an' complete. I've lost enough cows an' steers to Slick Gleason in the past. He can't pull it on me any more."

"That's what I told him. But he's right set on workin' 'em now."

"He's lookin' fer trouble, then."

Chuck's chin stuck out belligerently.

"Yuh've hit it on the head, fair an' square," he declared. "He's lookin' fer trouble. An' you know what that means."

They drove several miles in silence, while the incomparable sunrise flooded the valley with golden glory. The significance of what his foreman had said was sinking into the consciousness of the Senator at last. The matter of the girl in Denver was thrust into the background for the time being. Slick Gleason declaring war on the Circle Bar at last? For it could mean nothing less.

"How many boys we got in our outfit?" he said suddenly. "Eighteen, ain't there?"

"Seventeen," corrected Chuck. "Dippy Cooper is laid up with a busted leg. Hoss throwed him two days ago."

"Seventeen, then. How many has Slick got?"

"Twenty-two, I hear."

"Have we got plenty o' shells?"

"Bushels of 'em," said Chuck joyously. "An' every puncher on the place itchin' tuh make 'em go off."

"They would," agreed Keith dryly. "Nothin' suits a cowpuncher better than a chance fer gunplay. I don't want tuh have no truck with fool fightin' as a usual thing. But this is some different. Slick Gleason is spoilin' fer a scrap, looks like. Well, he'll git it."

"That's the talk, Sen!" almost shouted Chuck, driving the flivver swiftly to the summit of a knoll. The ranch buildings of the Circle Bar broke on their view suddenly—of log, mostly, with occasional adobe houses here and there, and a clear pole corral. A double fringe of cottonwoods half a mile back of the ranch house revealed the course of the winding Tea Kettle River, along whose bottoms the cattle of the two ranches—Keith's own and the Bar X, across the stream—mingled.

"Where are the boys now?"

"I've got most of 'em down in the bottoms, keepin' watch."

"That's right," approved his employer. "Have me a hoss saddled right away, will yuh? Then we'll ride down an' make talk with that maverick."

While he was changing into his ranch togs and awaiting the saddling of his horse, Senator Keith's anger was rising steadily. The bad blood between the two outfits had been on the point of boiling

more than once in the last six years. Slick Gleason, foreman of the Bar X, had on more than one occasion overridden his younger neighbor by sheer bulk. The Bar X outfit always outnumbered that of the Circle Bar. And the "workin' " of the cattle, spring and fall, had seldom failed to precipitate disputes almost culminating in open warfare.

"He don't git away with it this time!" the Senator muttered to himself as he buckled on his chaps. "I've had enough. This new boss thing is jest an excuse. Well, I'll give him all the excuse he wants, damn his hide!"

He buckled on his belt and guns. Then he took down his Winchester, loaded and ready for use, and slung an extra belt of rifle shells across his shoulders. When he rode down toward the river bottoms a few minutes later he was accoutered for trouble. His foreman was similarly equipped, as well as the three cowboys that rode behind them.

The Tea Kettle River was the boundary line between the two ranches, and neither owner would fence off what was certainly good water supply for his cattle. Hence, year after year, the cattle intermingled, crossing and re-crossing the stream at their pleasure. By spring the brands were inextricably mixed, and a special roundup was inevitable.

They found the Circle Bar outfit parading the river bank. The stream was running full from recent spring rains in the mountains, and melting snows. Senator Keith rode among them.

"You boys all heeled good?" he inquired. "Got plenty o' shells?"

They had. Their employer's belligerent demeanor brought them palpable satisfaction. They exhibited their hardware pridefully.

"They'd 'a' come across before this, only we told 'em we'd drown ary son-of-a-gun that tried it," asserted one of the outfit, Lefty Jordan by name. "So Slick Gleason, he hollered across he'd wait ontil this noon. Then if you hadn't showed up, he said, he'd start the roundup."

"Is Slick over there now?"

A sudden shout from the other side answered the question. It was Slick Gleason. He had seen the arrival of Senator Keith and wanted to talk business.

"Come ahead," invited Keith.

The Bar X foreman swam his horse across the stream, emerging dripping. He had held his Winchester high over his head, and the water had not reached as high as his ammunition. Keith saw that he was plentifully supplied with the latter. His men were patrolling the other side, mounted, awaiting developments.

The Bar X foreman was a bulky individual about forty years of age, with a very red face and a mustache that fairly bristled with his anger.

"This is a hell of a note!" he exploded. "I come down tuh work the stuff in the river bottom, and these bull-headed tarantulas o' yores tries tuh stop me! What kind of a ranch do yuh think you're runnin', anyhow?"

"My boys did jest what I told 'em to," said Keith calmly.

"The hell they did! Say, who do you think you are, anyhow? Since when did yuh start runnin' my business as well as your own?"

"I ain't tryin' tuh run anybody's business but mine," the Circle Bar owner told him. "But you know as well as I do, Slick, that this ain't no time tuh work beeves an' calves. Them brush steers of ours ain't even been branded—"

"Well, brand 'em, then!"

"—an' my Herefords, lots of 'em, was branded last fall after I bought 'em. They aim tuh go ag'in' the law. You kin start

"They've shed enough to suit me. Anyhow, you can't stop me from cuttin' out my own stuff, Keith. The law's with me there."

"Maybe it is," admitted Keith. "I don't aim tuh go ag'in the law. You kin start cuttin' out yore stuff whenever yuh git ready—with one understandin'."

"Yeah—an' what is it?"

"That every head, calves an' all, goes through the Circle Bar chute before they cross the river. That's flat."

"Not a head!" shouted the other man, his hand going to his gun holster as if by instinct. "Not a measly, hairy hide or

hoof! I got orders yuh round up the Bar X stuff right away. They goes across now. If yuh don't like it, Keith, you kin come over an' pick out yore own stuff out of my pens. Savvy?"

"I don't like it," Keith told him, his eyes glittering. "An' I won't stand fer it."

"Won't, hey?" The Bar X foreman seemed beside himself with rage. "What do yuh aim tuh do about it?"

"Jest this." Keith spoke in a tone of deadly quiet. "I'll give orders tuh shoot the first Bar X waddie that tries tuh land his hoss, or hisself, on this side of the Tea Kettle. If any of yuh drives ary critter into the river, it'll be after yuh've killed us all first. An' some of us is damn good shots."

The two men were standing almost cheek by jowl, their horses motionless. The feud of six years had come to a head at last. Slick Gleason was known as a cattleman who brooked nothing in the way of interference, once he had committed himself to a definite course. He was a fearless and relentless fighter, and he was backed by an outfit as fearless and relentless as himself.

The Circle Bar outfit was composed of similar tough material. Moreover, its members were even now itching to get into the conflict. They stood a little way off, their faces grim, their jaws hard. The Bar X man was safe just now, being under the protection of a flag of truce, as it were. But when he was back across the river, the strategic advantage, such as it was, would partially offset that afforded by the Bar X outfit's superiority of numbers. The river had to be forded under fire.

Gleason sensed this as he glared into the other cattleman's eyes.

"If you think I'm afraid of yuh, Keith, you're in fer a jolt," he said in a tone that matched that of the Circle Bar owner. "I've fought cattle wars in this country 'fore you was out o' knee britches. We're comin' acrost; an' if any waddie in this outfit"—he glared around disdainfully—"feels like takin' a shot at us while we're swimmin' the river, let him. Only"—he paused to let his words sink in—"real hemen wouldn't do it!"

With a touch of his spur he whirled and re-entered the swollen stream. Keith stifled an oath.

"We won't shoot yuh while yuh're in th' river," he called angrily. "If that's any comfort to yuh, come on."

The Bar X foreman disdained to answer, swimming his animal across the current with the skill of long experience. Arrived on the other side, Keith saw him call his outfit into conference. From the stiffening of their bodies, clearly visible, he sensed that the word had been given to begin fording the stream.

Instantly Keith barked sharp orders right and left. Not a shot was to be fired while the horses were swimming, he directed. But the moment a horse's feet encountered the bottom and it began to wade, hostilities would commence.

"No need o' killin' ary man—yet," he added. "Wing 'em. Let 'em know we mean business. If they keep right on comin' anyhow, we'll let 'em have it. But don't a man fire until I give th' word."

The sun was swinging high in the sky as the entire Bar X outfit, to a man, guided its horses grimly down to the water's edge and entered the current. For a considerable distance out from the other bank the water remained fairly shallow. Then, suddenly, the bottom fell away, and the horses floundered in up to their necks. Keith watched, sitting on his horse like a statue in bronze, his Winchester held in readiness and his chin stuck out. Every man in his outfit was in similar posture.

On came the invaders. Ordinarily they would have loosened their saddle rigs for the crossing; but in this case the risk would have been too great. The horses snorted as their nostrils went under from time to time. The men clung to the saddles, holding their rifles high to avoid getting them wet. It was a desperate venture; but Slick Gleason was known as a desperate fighter when his ire was up. He had been running the Bar X for six years in the absence of the owners, who lived somewhere in the East. Now that he was pledged to an accounting, it was evident that he intended to render it on time or die in the attempt.

"Boys," said Keith in a clear tone,

"we're in fer a fight. A real one, if I'm any judge. This here's a matter of principle, but I'm gonna make one more attempt tuh avoid bloodshed. Don't anybody crack down until I give the word."

They promised. The Bar X outfit, twenty-three strong, floundered toward the north bank. If they expected to be met with rifle fire while in midstream, despite Keith's promise, they gave no sign. Slick Gleason swam at their head, his face redder than ever in the sunlight. His horse's forefeet, cleaving the current, had splashed drops of muddy water over his countenance.

It was the foreman who gained solid bottom first. Two horsemen appeared suddenly over a rise of ground on the other side of the river and began riding down toward the bank. Keith stepped his horse forward.

"Gleason," he called, "I'm givin' yuh this last warnin'. You're plumb onreasonable. It don't seem right tuh start fannin' each other over such a fool thing. Why can't yuh act sensible?"

The pair on the other side of the river had reached the bank. Gleason's rifle was held in readiness. Several of his men gained the bottom and brought their horses to a stop, their faces grim, their guns alert. Every man in the Circle Bar outfit stood at attention, ready at the word of command to start shooting. They, too, awaited the result of their employer's final parley.

"There ain't nothin' tuh talk about, now," Gleason snapped. "I've told yuh my terms. Take 'em or leave 'em."

"It'll be hell when it starts," Keith warned. "A lotta good men shot up, an' all over a matter of workin' a few critters. You know I'm right, Gleason. Once any of my cattle got over in them pens, I wouldn't have a Chinaman's chance tuh git any of 'em back."

"What's the matter?" sneered the other foreman. "Skeered?"

It was the final straw. Keith's face went gray under the bronze. Other Bar X men were finding the solid bottom and coming to a stand in the shallow water. It was a grim scene—two lines of hard-faced cowboys, traditional enemies, literally alive with the senseless lust of battle, awaiting the signals of their leaders to begin what would certainly be a slaughter. The cattle in dispute were grazing quietly an eighth of a mile down stream, oblivious of the threatened carnage.

Keith's muscular right hand was clutching the trigger guard of his Winchester with such a grip that his knuckles showed white. Gleason was doing likewise. The two lines of men were tensed for action.

"All right, you damn fool!" It was Keith who spoke the challenge. "You—"

He started to raise the rifle, and Gleason, watching him like a hawk, made a similar movement. It was reflected along both lines of cowboys, like the impulse of a wave. The water curled sullenly around the feet of the Bar Cross horses. Soon there would be two lines of spitting fire—

A shout cut the sinister silence. It came from one of the figures on the shore. It was followed by a scream. Then—

"Don't you dare shoot!"

The command was in a feminine voice! Keith's rifle hand dropped simultaneously with his jaw. The Bar X foreman, tensed as if for a spring, watched him carefully. Then, satisfied that Keith's behavior was not a piece of strategy, he lowered his own gun and turned in his saddle to look.

"Who the hell are you?" he shouted, with traditional disregard for the presence of one of the opposite sex. The bulkier of the two figures answered.

"It's Miss Morton, Slick."

Gleason swore a round oath.

"Hell's fire! The new boss."

"My Denver girl!" exclaimed Senator Keith astonishingly, turning to his chief lieutenant. "Wouldn't that singe the whiskers off'n yore grandmother's pet prairie dog? I'd know her voice anywhere, even if she is dressed in pants right now."

Chuck Bosworth culled the makings out of his shirt pocket and began to roll a cigarette, sitting sidewise in the saddle. The war, he discerned, was definitely over.

"There'll be no more wranglin' between these two outfits," he observed wisely. "Not after what I heard you ravin' about this mornin', there won't."

He lighted the cigarette and tossed the match disgustedly from him. The Bar Cross were re-entering the river for an orderly retreat, led by their foreman. And Senator Keith, his shoulders squared in the pleased fashion of a young man in love, was following them as fast as his horse could be urged to take the current.

The *Chinook Rustler,* published weekly by an energetic youth who knew a story when he saw one, carried a solid two columns and a half on the wedding, a scant two months later. Miss Morton made a stunning June bride. After exhausting all the adjectives in the English language to describe her, the editor added:

"The meeting between them was romantic in the extreme if ye editor is any judge of such things.

"Miss Morton, it appears, was driving a car on one of the downtown streets of Denver, having stopped over for a day on her way from New York to Chinook. In the act of turning a corner, her car accidently struck down and rendered unconscious our esteemed fellow townsman.

"Without hesitating a moment, the beautiful New Yorker sprang from the car, lifted the stalwart form of the victim in her strong young arms, placed him in the seat, and drove like mad for the mountains. The bracing air of the upper heights revived him, and the instant he gazed into the lady's eyes he was lost."

Senator Keith read the article with his bride sitting on the arm of his chair. He grinned.

"So yuh had tuh knock me senseless in order tuh land me," he remarked. "That there editor is sure one smart young feller."

"He's a cheerful liar," she returned with spirit.

"Well, anyhow, yuh can't deny that yuh followed me down here a-purpose, after I told yuh my name," he charged. "If that ain't so, why didn't yuh tell me who *you* was, like I hinted fer yuh to do?"

Since an adequate answer would have involved an embarrassing explanation, perhaps, Mrs. Senator Keith merely blushed divinely, smiled adorably, and ran her fingers through her husband's curly hair.

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The Government pays all necessary expenses for the month in camp. Transportation, food and lodging, uniforms and equipment, laundry service—all is given the student camper during the training period without a cent of cost to himself. The only entrance requirements to this nation-wide university in manliness are an age limit from seventeen to twenty-four, physical fitness and good moral character.

The C. M. T. C. officer at the army post nearest your home will be glad to send you application blanks, detailed information and Citizens' Military Training Camp literature. Drop him a postal card to-day.

The Savvy of Blue Blazes

By Glenn A. Connor

When Gib Burns tried to tame Blue Blazes, the horse "settled his hash" mighty quick, but when Gib's girl, in desperate trouble, put her arms about the blue roan's neck and begged for help, that wild horse reacted just as any square-shooting Western man would.

"GIB BURNS on Blue Blazes!" It was the finals in the last day of the Sweetwater Rodeo. As Gib Burns mounted the side of the chutes, the big audience burst forth in a round of deafening applause. Blue Blazes' reputation was well known. So was Gib Burns'. Gib had a strangle hold upon first money—that is, until he drew Blue Blazes. Now there was much doubt expressed even among his most intimates. Blue Blazes was yet to be successfully ridden.

After climbing to the top of the chute, Burns paused to look the blue roan over before taking the saddle his helper handed

up to him. Burns had an experienced eye, the eye of a connoisseur in fact, when it came to sizing up a bucking horse. And Gib was soon made aware that a warm experience was to be his, with the results more or less in doubt.

Blue Blazes was a freak horse, as ill-formed a specimen of horse flesh as could be imagined, and yet there was something about him that impressed one as magnificent and awesome. Looked at from the front, he was perfect, beautiful. His head was perfectly shaped, broad between the eyes and tapering to thin, sensitive nostrils. His eyes were small, bloodshot, and gleamingly wicked, but contained a great amount of intelligence. The head and neck both set well with his great chest and heavy muscled forelegs.

But when one took a side view of the horse, one wanted to smile. The long barrel so deep just back of the forelegs, then rising at a sharp angle to the hind quarters, emphasized the difference in height of the front and rear quarters. Thick through the shoulders, narrowing hips, these last seemed to be the location for all points to draw in upon.

But Gib did not smile as he contemplated his opponent. He knew the severe struggle ahead of him. Here lay defeat or success. In a few more minutes he would know whether he or somebody else would carry away the silver-mounted saddle that was up for first prize. His lips were drawn together grimly tight.

He leaned down, took the saddle that was handed up to him, then placed it gently upon the roan's back. He shifted it forward until it sat high upon the horse's withers. Then he placed his boot upon the seat to hold it in place while his helpers drew the cinch. The helper drawing the latigo looked up. Gib gave his saddle a testing shake and shook his head. The latigo was drawn up another hole. The horse's knees commenced to show an inclination to buckle. Again the helper looked up and again Burns shook his head. Blue Blazes was tricky—he knew the significance of buckling knees. But Gib was not to be deceived. He would take no chances on a saddle turning.

"Give 'er another hole," he ordered. At last he nodded satisfied. As he straddled the chute the audience suddenly grew silent, tense. In another second he had dropped lightly into the saddle.

The helpers' hands assisted him in getting his stirrups, through the cracks in the chute. He gave a settling squirm, took a slightly shorter grip upon the single rein. The helpers sprang to the iron bars that braced the gates close, crouching, ready to swing the chute apart at the rider's signal.

"Pull 'em wide open when I say," came Burns' instructions. Blue Blazes had a habit of commencing his action immediately inside the chutes and the rider meant to take no chances getting his legs jambed against half open gates.

"Say when!" came back from the helpers.

Gib raised his hand to his hat. "Let 'er buck!"

The chute opened wide. For a tense second the horse remained immovable. Gib felt the tensing of muscles, a thrill shot through his own body. Then horse and rider catapulted forward.

A scurry of dust that for a second enveloped the scene, the maddened bawl of a beast, the thud of hoofs in their first contact with the earth; the shrill, daredevil yell of the rider, the slap of hat and clink of spurs. Then the two emerged into sight again.

Blue Blazes darted forward in a whirlwind of buck-jumps, then again he catapulted skyward, swapping ends in mid-air and striking with a stiff-legged jolt that shook the earth. Gib was riding pretty, for all the world like he was glued to his saddle. He took those heart-shaking jolts with graceful ease, relaxing at the proper moment.

But Blue Blazes had only commenced. He now changed his tactics with bewildering suddenness. Using his hind feet for a pivot, he started whirling with dizzying velocity. The yell suddenly died upon his rider's lips. He lurched sickeningly in the saddle, his body leaning farther and farther outward. Suddenly he made a wild grab for leather, his left foot lost its stirrup, his fingers just grazed the saddle horn in passing. For an instant his spur hooked upon the cantle of the saddle and clung

there, his body whirling at right angles with the horse, his arms beating frantically. Then the hold was torn loose and Gib sped through the air to land with an audible thud some twenty feet away.

"Ye gods!" exclaimed Tod Campbell, one of the judges. "I never seen a feller get busted so hard before in my life. An' Gib Burns, too!"

Fent Hardy, another of the judges, snorted, choked, and growled his own amazement under his breath. "Burns was up for first place, too!" he grunted. "Tod, 'tain't like that young buck tuh take kindly tuh no such defeat," he added after a moment's thought.

Campbell looked at him in quick surprise. "I don't catch your drift, Fent."

"I mean," exclaimed Hardy, "that Burns'll buy that hoss if he has to in order tuh conquer him. I know 'im—he rode for me for three years, an' I got yet tuh see him meet defeat in th' end. Yuh get what I mean? Hoss has throwed him before, but not for all time."

Campbell caught his drift and together they turned to contemplate the rider who had just picked himself up and was shaking the dust from his clothes. He paused in his dusting off to contemplate the blue roan that was now being led back toward the corrals. Gib seemed neither crestfallen nor angered. Rather there was an unspoken challenge in his manner. The bunch of riders, that descended upon him to learn if he had met with any injuries, were greeted with a broad grin.

After assuring them he was still safe and sound, he singled out a short, heavy set rider, and started talking to him in a low, vehement manner. The conversation continued for several minutes, the short rider doubtful, reluctant, the other persuasive and urgent.

Hardy poked Campbell in the ribs. "What'd I tell yuh?" he whispered triumphly. "That's Stub Pringle, Blue Blazes' owner. An' see—Gib is passin' him up a handful of bills!"

Campbell nodded. "Done closed the deal," muttered Tod, as Pringle accepted the bills and started shoving them into his pocket. "Well, looks like Burns is determined tuh own the hoss that knocked his loose from the finals, even if he can't win the saddle."

"BROKE but happy," grinned Gib, as he contemplated the blue roan restlessly circling the corral. Burns was back at his ranch after failing to cop the final prize at the Sweetwater Rodeo. This ranch, if it could be so termed, was Gib's pride and joy. It consisted of a section of land (which Uncle Sam wagered him against thirty-some dollars that he couldn't live on for three consecutive years) with a single-room but that housed his bunk, stove, and a few necessary cooking utensils and a smaller variety of grub, a barn that was a much more pretentious building than his living quarters, and a double corral.

The corrals were the most substantial structures of the lot, and for a sufficient reason. Burns' present source of livelihood was breaking horses for the various big outfits throughout the country, and it required sturdy corrals to withstand the strain put upon them by these cagy beasts.

Burns had located on a spot isolated by miles upon miles of rolling hills of wonderful rangeland. It was unmarked by a telephone line. His only means of communication with the outside world was the one dim trail that ran to and through his place.

If he had many horses to break he sometimes hired help, but more often he worked alone. The owners for whom he worked had often advised him against this latter course, pointing out the ceaseless run of risks he was taking. But Gib only laughed, secure in his super-horsemanship.

Dot Westfield, for whose father Gib had broken and was still breaking many horses, seemed to worry more over Gib's safety than the more stern-minded ranchers. Dot made it a point to pay Burns at least a weekly visit, this in spite of the fact it represented a twenty-mile ride from her father's ranch and back. Or, if she found herself unable to make such a ride, she made it a point to see that some of her father's riders happened in occasionally to see how Gib was progressing. We may surmise her interest and concern was more than passing. And why not? Gib was not unhandsome, and he was *very* likable.

And now that Burns had come into possession of Blue Blazes, she felt she had all the more cause to worry. She knew Gib's daring and reckless spirit. Through Fent Hardy, their nearest neighbor, she learned what that undaunted rider undoubtedly meant to do. *Conquer* Blue Blazes!

Even as Dot was considering the probable consequences, Gib at that moment was entering the corral with his rope, where Blue Blazes was confined. He had removed his saddle from the back of his mount and had thrown it upon the top pole of the corral. A hackamore with one rein hung from the horn. His saddle horse still wore his bridle, wandering about the yard with dragging reins, in search of a nibble of grass.

As Burns shook out his loop, Blue Blazes paused and eyed him attentively. He probably remembered defeating this man once and was wondering what his movements portended now. As Burns advanced toward him, loop dragging, Blue Blazes took it as significant enough and again started circling the corral. As the roper took a quick step forward, the horse increased his pace, but not quickly enough. The loop whistled forward with a twisting motion and whipped tight about his neck.

Blue Blazes knew the meaning and whirled obediently about. He followed docilely enough as Burns started toward the fence where his saddle and hackamore hung. He even submitted to the hackamore being slipped over his ears and the saddle placed upon his back without any great degree of protest. Burns had saddled alone many much tougher customers than the blue roan proved to be.

But there was a smouldering, sullen look in the horse's eyes that was at once a warning and a promise. His manner was altogether too submissive. Those blood-flecked eyes glowed ominously. He was merely awaiting his turn to retaliate in his own way.

Gib gave his saddle a last testing shake, took a firmer grip upon the rein with his left hand. Then he grasped the hackamore with his left, twisted the stirrup with his right, and shoved the toe of his boot into the stirrup. Then grasping the horn with his right hand, he checked the horse sharply toward him as he swung like a flash into the saddle.

There was no pause upon Blue Blazes' part this time. As soon as he felt that weight strike the saddle, he lunged viciously forward. Gib still had his head twisted to one side, the horse not giving him time to turn loose the check. The circumstances proved disastrous for both horse and rider. No rider could withstand the steel-muscled power in that short, thick neck. Burns was jerked sidewise in the saddle. The horse, not getting his head in time, was thrown off balance. He crashed over forwards, pinning his rider beneath him.

For a second four hoofs beat the air futilely. Then Blue Blazes managed to roll over and again regained his feet. He trotted off to the opposite side of the corral, then turned to regard his rider who still lay prostrate in the dirt.

Twenty minutes dragged by and Burns' eyes finally fluttered open. He started to struggle erect and instantly sank back with a smothered groan. His face was dust-streaked and gray with pain. The horse regarded him curiously, advanced a tentative step or so and sniffed of the earth. Burns twisted his head with a painful effort to regard his foe.

"You blue devil!" he gritted. "Yuh've sure laid me out proper!"

Gib sat up with a sharp yip of pain and started to take an inventory of his injuries. Objects swam dizzily before his eyes; sharp, excruciating pains filled his chest. His eyes, dark with torture, fastened upon his leg that was devoid of all feeling.

"Broke!" he exclaimed, and another sharp twinge assailed his chest at the effort of the word, pain that had the sensation of red hot needles coursing through his system. His face twisted with agony and surprise. He gingerly felt of his ribs and found four unmistakably broken.

Gib was not long deciding what should be done. He must get to the cabin, if such a thing was humanly possible, and trust to luck that either Dot or some of the boys would take a notion to pay him a call soon. So far as he was concerned, he was helpless to aid himself. His saddle horse had wandered some distance away, and even if

he could catch him he knew he would be unable to get his saddle off of Blue Blazes' back in his present helpless condition.

Then commenced that long, heartbreaking task of overcoming the space that lay between the corrals and the cabin. The distance was little more than a hundred yards, yet to Burns' pain-racked body it seemed a mile. He dragged his body along like a dog who has had his hindquarters disabled, his face screwed up with pain, his efforts bringing beads of sweat to his face and blinding his vision.

After dragging his body under the corral gate, he paused, debated whether he should make an attempt to open the gate and let the outlaw out. No telling how long it would be before somebody happened in, and, in spite of his grievance against Blue Blazes, he could not see him starve. After an effort that cost him a precious lot of strength, he finally managed to drag himself up to where he could remove the loop that held the gate shut, and pushed it open.

It was not Burns' nature to see a dumb beast suffer uselessly. Whether his injuries were entirely a fault of the horse's or not, the rider did not hold it against him to the extent of craving such a revenge. His hesitation originated from another cause, a thought of the purpose he might put Blue Blazes to. But any such idea was instantly abandoned. Blue Blazes was an outlaw pure and simple. What hope of rescue could he hope for from that source?

Then came that long, difficult task of dragging his useless body to the cabin. Beads of perspiration appeared upon his face. The numbness of the shock commenced to leave him. But he continued doggedly with his purpose, although each effort cost him agonizing torture. With gritting teeth and pain-twisted features, he dragged himself along at a snail-like pace.

Objects swam dizzily before his eyes. Time and again he paused to dig at his eyes with his fists, to clear away that which obscured his vision. But each time he took up his course the objects grew more indistinct, in spite of the fact that he was drawing closer to them. He lived as in a vale of darkness, as though night had suddenly descended. Gib wondered vaguely between groans if he had been so long on the way, if night really had descended.

At last his clutching fingers came in contact with the log wall. With a last desperate effort, he drew his body along the wall to the opening. Fortunately the door stood open. Half in, half out, he wilted, his last shred of consciousness deserting him.

As soon as the man had withdrawn from the gate to a safe distance, Blue Blazes approached it cautiously, sniffed suspiciously of the opening, then jerked his head erect and stared curiously at the slow, retreating form of his victim. There was puzzlement in his regard. Here was a mystery, his horse instinct told him, that was beyond his understanding.

Blue Blazes was wise in the ways of his enemies. He knew from past experience that the saddle should have been removed from his back before he was allowed to leave the corral. And what made the man act like that—dragging his body along instead of walking?

Blue Blazes shook his head, snorted, and pawed at the earth. He shook his body vigorously, probably thinking he could rid his back of its hated pack. But the saddle stuck, and the outlaw took a tentative step forward, a second and third. He was now clear of the gateway, free, a white trail lying distinct before him. It was natural his eyes should turn toward home, to the distant purple hills to the north.

It was not affection for his former master that caused him to stare so long and steadily. There lay his old haunts, his companions of the range. It was merely the homing instinct.

His eyes turned for a moment to regard Burns' saddle horse grazing a short distance away, he even took a few hesitant steps in his direction. Then, as if reaching a sudden decision, he whirled about and tore down the trail that led to the north.

Once his mind was made up, nothing could deter the outlaw from his course—not even the five-wire fence that enclosed Burns' section of land. He cleared the fence in a long leap that was as graceful as an antelope's, struck the earth upon the other side with hardly a break in his stride, and continued on down the slope at a break-neck speed.

DOT WESTFIELD was unable to cast a premonition from her mind. The more she thought about it, the more vividly she could call to mind the scene that was actually occurring. For half an hour her brow corrugated in a perpetual worried frown, trying to visualize what was likely to occur under the circumstances. At the end of that time her imagination had worked her into such a fever of anxiety that she could no longer control herself.

Going to the kitchen, she hastily put herself up a saddle lunch. Fifteen minutes later found her in the saddle and heading out across the range to the south.

The fact that she was on her way to learn of Burns' welfare should have relieved her mind to a certain extent, but instead her disturbance increased. But being range bred, Dot knew better than to set her horse out at his best. The horse was young, full of fire, and willing enough, but she held him down to a steady, easy pace for the first couple of miles. After that she eased him out gradually, her anxiety incerasing in proportion, until the little bay was fairly skimming over the uneven surface of the earth.

Eight, ten miles slid back of his ground-eating little hoofs. Dot suddenly brought him up with a sharp tug upon the reins. A startled exclamation burst from her lips as the dust-cloud parted and the blue roan became visible. Blue blazes saw her at the same time and swerved abruptly from the trail, trying to circle around her. As she caught sight of the saddle upon his back her eyes dilated, she sat for an instant stunned, then, with a wild cry, she clapped spurs to her mount and whirled him in pursuit.

The chase waxed furious, with the outcome for a moment in doubt. But Dot was desperate, and her little bay was extremely fleet of foot. Foot by foot the little bay drew up on the tail of the roan outlaw. Blue Blazes swerved still further from the trail, cut across a treacherous stretch of prairie-dog town. The little bay ran close to the ground, stretched out so he seemed barely to clear it. His nose drew up alongside the other's hip, then his shoulder.

Dot leaned forward in the saddle and sidewise, reaching out with a desperate hand to grasp at the reins fluttering in the wind of the outlaw's speed. They aggravatingly grazed her fingers—the little bay was doing his best and seemed now to be no more than holding his own. She leaned still farther to one side, precariously, and made a second wild grab for the fluttering reins.

This time her fingers clamped about them, froze to them with a grip of her last atom of strength. At the same instant her mount struck one of the prairie dog holes, stumbled to his nose. Blue Blazes swerved again, in the opposite direction.

The result was disastrous to Dot. Blue Blazes' sudden swerve and her pony's stumbling threw her completely off her balance. She felt herself yanked through space, then struck the ground with painful force. But she had presence of mind enough to retain her death-like grip upon the captured reins.

Feeling that tug upon his reins, Blue Blazes came to an instant stop. The little bay quickly regained his feet—and continued his break-neck speed back toward the trail and home. Dot sat up with a painful effort and stared after her delinquent saddle horse in dismay.

For a moment she was stunned to inactivity by this latest calamity. The little bay raced up the trail looking to neither right nor left, and soon disappeared from sight. It was Blue Blazes' snort that finally recalled her to existing conditions.

Dot twisted her head, then sprang to her feet with a startled ejaculation. For a time she stared in awe and fear at this renowned outlaw, until the presence of Gib's saddle upon his back recalled her to more serious considerations.

"Oh, my God, Blue Blazes, what *have* you done? What has happened?" The horse's answer was a snort and a backing farther away as the reins became slack. This seemed to stir Dot's thoughts to something like coherency. She must do something and do it quick. No telling how seriously Gib might be hurt—why, he might even be dying!

This last thought drove her nearly frantic. It suddenly occurred to her how

much this dare-devil rider meant to her. "Oh, if he is dead or dies, I want to die too!" she cried hysterically.

Then a wild, reckless plan, born of desperation, flashed into her mind. She must reach him and reach him quick. Her own horse was gone! But there was Blue Blazes—saddled—

Dot's lips went colorless, her hands shook. She eyed the outlaw steadily, trying to keep the terror out of her eyes. "What—what chance—have I—with you—when you can throw a wonderful rider like Gib Burns!" she whispered.

Then her innate knowledge of horses came to her rescue and gave her renewed courage. It was still ten miles to Gib Burns' ranch—and if she was to get there in time Blue Blazes was her only chance.

She approached him cautiously, holding a hand coaxingly forward. These were strange tactics to Blue Blazes, accustomed as he was to the more or less harsh handling of cowboys. He snorted and backed still farther away. But at a sharp tug of the reins he came forward again, sniffed suspiciously at the outstretched hand. The girl took a shorter hold upon the reins and gently stroked his muzzle with her fingers. The horse drew a whistling breath, stamped nervously, but suffered himself to be petted.

Dot's attitude had undeniable effect upon him. Soon his trembling ceased beneath her gentle stroking of his head and neck. Her soft-spoken words soothed and banished his last doubts. As she stepped back the horse followed her instinctively. This was encouraging and significant.

A wild, joyous thought flashed through her mind, a thought that caused her eyes to narrow speculatively. "Stranger things have happened!" she murmured, half fearful, half in hope. She was a strong believer that horses are capable of forming likes and dislikes the same as humans, that their intelligence and understanding are far greater than they are given credit for. She decided to try the horse out further.

The test she put him to this time was little short of foolhardy if she really expected to use the horse to carry her over the remaining distance to Burns' ranch. Yet she felt everything depended upon this test. If Blue Blazes failed to act according to her expectations then she knew her chances to ride him were gone and he might better be at liberty.

Giving his short, sleek neck a few more strokes with her hand, this time she deliberately dropped his reins, turned her back upon him, and walked away a dozen paces. She stopped, waiting, fearful, her ears strained to catch the least hopeful sound, not even daring to take a peek with her eyes. It seemed to her harassed nerves that she stood there for a century before the first intimation of a movement came.

Blue Blazes gazed at her doubtfully, as if a bit bewildered. The wild fire that had been in his eyes had now disappeared; in its place there was a soft, mellow glow. He was conscious of a pleasurable thrill at the contact of those soft hands. The utterance of those gently spoken, meaningless words fascinated him. He did not know what to make of it, but he knew it was altogether soothing, pleasurable.

For a moment his head swung toward the trail. That was the direction in which the little bay had disappeared, and that was the direction in which he had been traveling. He was free to go now, but still he stood, struggling with an intangible problem. There was something he wanted, wanted more than to reach his old haunts and companions.

He took a tentative step forward, sniffed of the ground where the girl had stood. Dot heard the soft thud of his feet. Her heart beat high in her throat.

Then a muzzle touched her shoulder, gave her a gentle shove. Dot turned carefully so as not to frighten the still doubtful roan, and put her arms about his neck. Her cheeks, suddenly wet, pressed tightly against his velvet hide.

For some time the two stood thus, the girl's arms about his neck, the horse's head resting lightly upon her shoulder. If ever a horse showed joy it was depicted in Blue Blazes' eyes at that instant. In Dot's tearful eyes were unutterable relief, thanksgiving, a tumult of emotion hard to analyze.

"Blue Blazes,—you—you're close to—human!" the girl cried brokenly. Then

the urgency of her quest again stirred her to feverish activity. Hesitant no longer, she dropped to the ground, tore off her spurs, then, catching a stirrup, swung lightly into the saddle upon the outlaw's back.

Blue Blazes flinched and quivered; a hump grew in his back instinctively. Dot felt a flexing of those powerful muscles, and a shock like an electric current shot through her. She felt at any instant now she would be dashed to the earth, maybe trampled beneath those destroying hoofs.

But Blue Blazes did not follow out his first significant actions. Instead his back dropped back to normal, his steel muscles relaxed. Dot got back her nerve, leaned forward and patted the horse reassuringly upon the neck, whispered soothing words in the nervous, twitching ears. At her urge the horse walked slowly forward. A gentle tug of the reins and he stopped.

Dot tried him out farther. She tried to neck rein him, but Blue Blazes' education had never advanced that far. But she found that by drawing his head around she could turn him into a different course. At last she headed him for the trail, letting him choose his own course at a walk.

At the trail Blue Blazes' ideas of where they should go were entirely at variance with Dot's. He insisted on going north. He doggedly set a course that Dot was unable to draw him from with her puny strength. After vainly trying to turn his head about she tried stopping him. But Blue Blazes refused even to stop now. The thing that had attracted him was upon his back now, and the second idea of importance was to get back to his old home.

His pace quickened from a shambling walk to a trot, and then to a long, swinging gallop that covered ground rapidly. Dot flung a look of despair back over her shoulder. Then she turned back, white of face and lip, to await the fate in store for her.

A GROUP of Westfield's riders just topped a rise in sight of the trail. Their attention was instantly attracted by a cloud of dust traveling over it.

"That fellah's travelin' like it's a case of life an' death," one of them remarked.

"Let's gallop down tuh the trail an' see what's up," suggested another. Following suit to his words, he started his horse down the slope at a rapid canter. This pace was quickly increased to a lope when they saw how swiftly the other horse was approaching. The lope ended in a race to arrive at the trail in time. The cowboys had no more than checked their mounts when a blue roan dashed into their midst.

The riders for a moment were stricken dumb, incredulous, unable to credit the evidence of their eyes. "Dot Westfield!" one finally managed to gasp.

"On Blue Blazes!" echoed a second, a mixture of bewilderment, wonder, and disbelief in his face.

Unwilling to credit their eyes, the riders could only stand and stare. Blue Blazes stopped now willingly enough, and seemed the least agitated of the group. He was blowing hard from his long run, but otherwise he showed little indication of exhaustion.

At last Dot recovered her breath sufficiently to gasp, "Quick—get a doctor! Gib is bad hurt—oh, I know he is! I found Blue Blazes out here on the range—with Gib's saddle on!"

Thus assured by the girl herself that the horse really was Blue Blazes, the cowboys began to show symptoms of life. Cash Hardy, her father's foreman, spurred his horse up alongside the outlaw, took a secure hold upon the outlaw's hackamore, and turned a scared face toward the girl.

"Tumble off this devil before he kills yuh!" he ordered hoarsely.

Blue Blazes snorted and reared back, tearing Hardy's grip free of the hackamore. The others watched with protruding eyes, their faces white, expecting to see him crash over backwards with his fair rider. But Blue Blazes spun about in mid-air and came down feet first, his rider still secure in her seat.

Dot flashed out in anger, "Cash Hardy, keep your hands off this horse. I've rode him safely this far and I will continue to do so if you leave us alone!" Then her rage died out as quickly as it appeared. "Oh, please do something!" she appealed frantically. "Gib may be dying!"

Thus reassured of the girl's apparent

safety, Hardy became his normal resourceful self. "Where is Gib?"

"Why—I—I don't know. At home I guess. Yes, he must be!"

Hardy stared at her for a moment in silence. "Yuh ain't seen him, then?"

"No, no!" she exclaimed, impatient and aggravated.

"Then how do yuh know he's hurt—or is at home?" demanded the foreman practically.

"Oh, Cash, don't sit there and argue! If he isn't hurt how come his horse out on the range with Gib's saddle on? And isn't it natural to suppose he tried to ride Blue Blazes at his place?"

Cash decided so, too, and turned briskly to the riders. " Sam, you ride to the ranch an' telephone for the saw-bones. Dot," he ordered, turning back to the girl, "you ride back with Sam. I reckon your dad is goin' tuh throw a fit when he sees yuh on that blue devil. I can't understand yet——"

"I'll do nothing of the kind!" the girl cut in determinedly, her blue eyes flashing defiance. "Cash Hardy, I'm riding right along with you."

Hardy gave her one look and threw up his hands in surrender. "No use buckin' the stubborn blood of the Westfields," he muttered to himself. A nod of his head sent Sam clattering down the trail back to the ranch. Then with a motion of his hand for the others to follow him, he whirled his horse and started at a fast clip up the trail.

Dot had no trouble at all now in turning the blue roan's head about. With other horses for company Blue Blazes showed less reluctance in returning. The horse had speed in spite of his ungainly shape, and soon it was Dot who was leading the cavalcade. In fact the other horses were hard put to it to keep up with her. Blue Blazes had a long, swinging gait that ate up distance at an amazing rate.

The girl was first to come in sight of Burns' cabin, having gained a far larger margin on the riders when Blue Blazes surmounted the barrier of the fence as he had when making his escape, while the others were compelled to stop long enough to open the wire gate.

Gib still lay half in and half out of the doorway of his cabin, again conscious; but the sharp, throbbing pains of his injuries held him in a state of semi-coma. But at sound of the clattering hoofs he aroused himself, drew his pain-racked body erect by catching hold of each side of the doorway. The sight that met his gaze for the moment made him forget his physical torture.

His sight was hazy; for a time he thought he was looking upon the illusion of a disordered mind. Galloping through the mist toward him came Blue Blazes, and in the saddle was——

Dot Westfield!

He would not believe—he could not believe, yet the audible thud of hoofs assured him there was in reality a horse coming. But Blue Blazes—and Dot Westfield upon his back—that mere slip of a girl—the thing was incredible! His eyes were seeing things that did not exist, that was all.

He shut his eyes tight, trying to obliterate the sight from his mind. The hoofbeats grew louder, there came an exclamation that was undoubtedly feminine, and the sounds died abruptly. Then came the swift, light patter of footsteps, a second exclamation of concern. Burns refused to look, certain that he was dreaming.

Soft arms encircled his neck, a still gentler hand smoothed the hair back from his dusty and feverish streaked face. Soft, significant words fell upon his hearing. His eyes popped open.

The first object that met his gaze was Blue Blazes standing a short distance away his head drooping, his sides heaving convulsively, his blue coat foam-flecked. Gib blinked rapidly, rubbed his eyes, and looked again. There could be no mistake. The outlaw stood broadside to him, all his ungainly form in silhouette. There was but one such freak horse. Yes, it was assuredly Blue Blazes!

Then Gib's head twisted slowly toward the girl. One hand stole up investigatingly to see if she were a real flesh and blood person. Their eyes met. Gib stared at her in wonder and awe.

"Dot Westfield! Is it really you?"

"Of course it is," she assured him in an unsteady whisper.

"An'—an'—yuh really rode that blue devil?"

The girl nodded.

Burns stared at her, his jaw dropping, bewildered. Then his arms encircled the girl's shoulders and crushed her to him in spite of the agony of pain it caused him.

"Good God," he choked hoarsely, "what if he had killed yuh! Dot—gal—don't yuh see what that would have meant tuh me? I—I—"

Dot pressed her tear-stained cheek against his. She had known for a long time that Gib loved her, but this was the first time he had ever uttered a word.

Now she spoke, and every word throbbed with feeling. "Gib, dear, it was just the understanding of Blue Blazes. He knew I was just a helpless girl. Tell me a horse hasn't a soul!"

Now the cowboys rode into sight upon the ridge. Dot broke free of Burns' embrace in confusion.

Burns looked up, saw the riders, and turned swiftly to Dot. His hands closed upon hers. "Honey, I—I'm kinda gettin' the savvy of Blue Blazes. You're just—just a helpless little girl—I'm wonderin' if yuh'll marry me!"

Dot gave a startled look, cast a quick glance at the oncoming riders, and blushed becomingly. "Oh, you conceited men!" she exclaimed. Then a roguish smile came to her lips, a bit tremulous. She flashed back daringly, "It's you, I think, that requires looking after—and just to prove to you I'm not as helpless as you seem to think, I'll undertake the responsibility."

Any further speech was smothered against Burns' shoulder.

As the cavalcade rode up, Hardy snorted with disgust, "Hell, here we was expectin' tuh find a dead man an' instead we come on a lovesick pair of doves. I reckon we better send for a preacher instead of a doc!"

VIVID MEXICO

THE average American thinks of Mexico always as a "situation," often as a "problem," sometimes as a "crisis," but never as a land full of everyday folks acting in an everyday manner.

Yet that is just what Mexico is. And its people go about their daily pursuits and pleasures even when they and their affairs are presented to the rest of the world each morning at breakfast as the "latest phase in the deadlock between Mexico City and Washington."

It is a great relief to turn from politics, economics and all connected with them and observe the Mexicans crowding the streets as if nothing in particular were happening; making excursions into the country, siting unconcernedly in cafés watching the world go by.

That is what they are doing now—though President Calles is warring against American oil men, and Secretary Kellogg is shaking an admonitory finger at him, and railroad trains are being held up by armed men whom you call bandits if you are for Calles and revolutionists if you are not. To the casual visitor to Mexico, who is on the outside looking in, Mexicans seem to be taking these things very cheerfully.

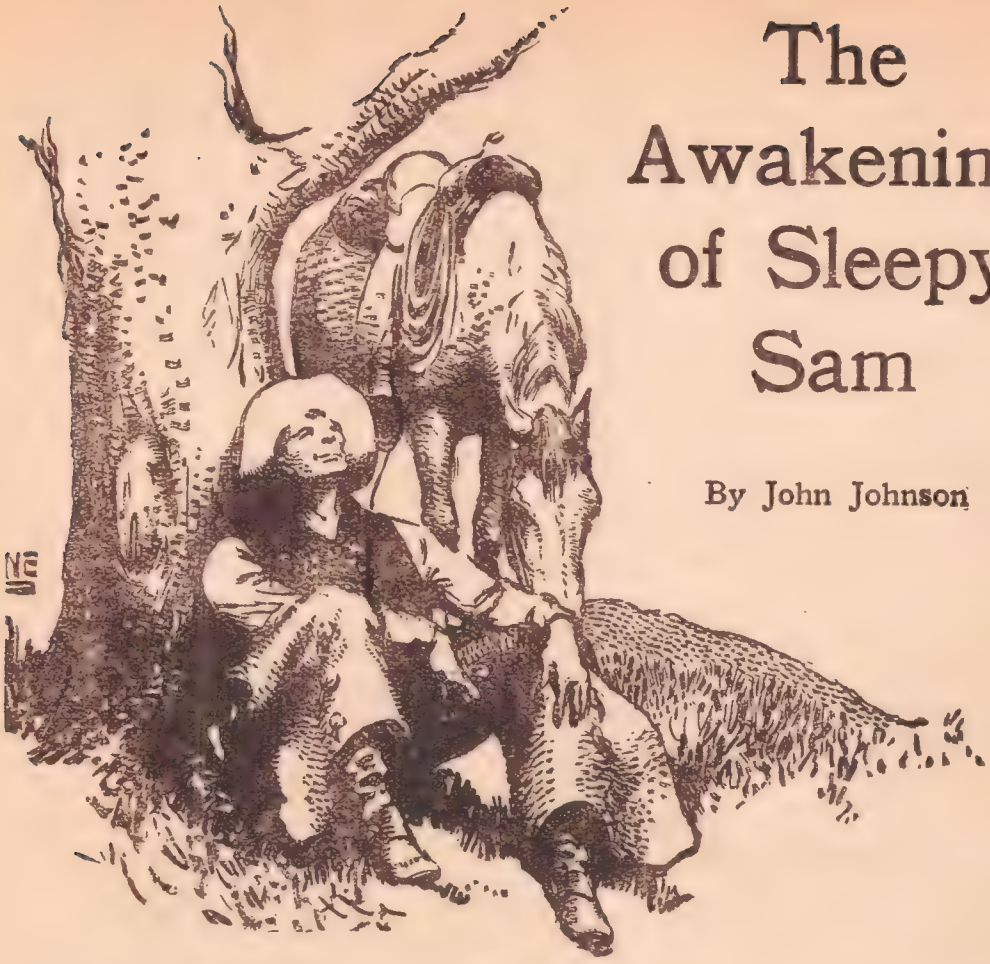
For instance, those who know Mexico will be happy to learn that Xochimilco is still going strong. For the benefit of those who do not know it, Xochimilco is the place where the floating gardens are. It is just outside Mexico City, and it is one of the really remarkable "sights" of this world. The floating gardens are tiny islands, on which flowers and vegetables are grown by the Indians of the neighborhood. In the days of the Aztecs they really floated, but now they have become fixed to the bed of the waterways which pervade the Xochimilco region. In a boat covered with a rough awning, bedecked with flowers and propelled by a brown Indian in straw hat, blouse, trousers and bare feet, one threads these waterways, with other similar gay craft on every hand, while Indian men and women paddle up in little dugouts offering to sell everything from flowers and garden truck to a square meal—chicken, tortillas, coffee, everything—which one can see cooking on little stoves in the bottoms of the boats.

Or one can land on a "floating island" and have lunch served in a shack there; the boatman will act as waiter to bring the food from an adjoining shack where an Indian woman cooks it, and he is very grateful if one buys an extra bottle of beer and tells him to drink it. While one eats, big boats, all covered with bright flowers, go past, with sometimes as many as twenty happy revelers seated at long, narrow tables running down the middle: they raise their glasses and cheerfully drink the health of the "gringo" lunching in the island shack.

Xochimilco reminds one somewhat of the Thames above London, with its innumerable boatloads of merrymakers. But it is a Thames made exotic and barbaric; a Thames buried in flowers, drenched in sunshine, soaked in color.

Yes, Xochimilco is still going strong.

—*T. R. Ybarra in The N. Y. Times.*



The Awakening of Sleepy Sam

By John Johnson

That sleepin' beauty hombre who joined the T Bar Ranch sure ran Rip Van Winkle a close second as the champion sleeper of the world. But there's one thing can keep the sleepiest hombre awake—you folks can guess THAT easy.

IT was Sunday afternoon, and the T Bar ranch yard was silent. The punchers were lounging about the bunkhouse, or else repairing boots and saddles.

Harry Seymour stretched and yawned. "Ho hum! Wish somebody'd come," he muttered.

Bill Parks, the foreman, looked toward the road.

"Looks like we got a caller right now," he observed. "Boys, just look at that!"

The punchers rose and stared. Down the driveway that led to the ranch from the road came a horse. This horse was equipped with a full cowpony's rigging, down to the brass buttons which studded the head stall. And in the saddle was a young cowpuncher fast asleep.

"Well, would you look at the sleepin' beauty!" exclaimed Harry Seymour.

The puncher's feet were dangling loosely, having slipped out of the stirrups. He was leaning far forward on his horse's neck, bent almost double. Despite his cramped position he was sleeping soundly and peacefully. He breathed evenly, and swayed gently as the cowpony plodded on at a slow pace.

"Looks darn near as comfortable as sleepin' on a Pullman car," commented a puncher.

Then the pony raised his head with sudden interest. Nearby at the side of the corral was a water-trough, filled to the brim. The animal had come a long way, and was thirsty and tired. With

a snort the bronc suddenly began to gallop toward the trough.

The quickening of pace did not wake the rider, he merely swayed a bit more, and slept on. The bronc came on with a rush, up to the very edge of the water trough. There he stopped so suddenly that he slid on his hoofs for a couple of feet, and then, bending his head with a jerk, he dipped his nose into the cool water and drank greedily.

But the sudden stopping of the bronc proved to be too much for the slumbering cowpuncher in the saddle. When the bronc slid to a stop, the sleeper pitched far forward on the animal's neck, his dangling feet swinging loosely.

Then when the pony suddenly plunged his nose down into the water, the puncher's last support was removed. He fairly flew in a graceful curve out over the animal's neck, grabbed wildly at the air, and lit in the water-trough with a terrific splash.

This remarkable dismounting of the sleeping rider was too much for the punchers of the T Bar. Their howls of laughter broke the stillness with a great roar.

"Oh, take me away 'fore I bust!" gasped Harry as he tried to control himself.

There was a great commotion in that horse-trough for a moment, and the water flew up like a geyser. Then a very wet and very dark-haired young puncher raised his head over the edge. He rubbed his eyes, and peered at his horse.

"You're a deuce of a pore friend, bronc!" said the awakened sleeper solemnly.

This drew another roar from the assembled punchers. The bronc merely gazed placidly at his master, then dipped his nose into the water again for another drink. With a sigh the young rider climbed out of the horse-trough, and stood dripping but undisturbed.

"Any chance to get a job with this outfit?" he inquired calmly of the assembly at large.

Bill Parks, the foreman, came forward. "We might use a rider," he said with peculiar emphasis, a twinkle in his eye, "but the trouble is, we need a man who can stay on a horse without fallin' off!"

The stranger grinned. "Maybe I ain't so good at it while I'm asleep, but when I'm awake I can ride any horse you give me!" His tone was jovial, but there was a challenge in his level brown eyes.

The foreman raised his eyebrows. "Yeah?" he asked. "Well, we'll get you some dry clothes, and then you c'n try yore hand at ridin' Sunfish!" With a grin the new puncher accepted the challenge.

In short order the newcomer was dressed in dry clothing which several of the cowpunchers dug up for him. A few moments later he was in the corral, looking thoughtfully at the horse before him, while on top of the corral fence the cowpunchers sat and waited expectantly.

Sunfish was the pride and joy of the T Bar Ranch. He was a big bay horse, and he was the hardest and most persistent bucker in the whole outfit. It was the custom of the T Bar boys to urge cocky strangers to ride this innocent-looking piece of equine dynamite, and the result was usually that the stranger was taken down a peg. Now the hands nudged each other gleefully and awaited the newcomer's downfall. "He'll wish he was back in that hoss-trough again!" murmured a puncher.

But the young stranger did not fulfill their expectations. He was fully wide-awake, and nerved for the contest. Two punchers held Sunfish's head while the rider leaped into the saddle. Then they fled away, and the duel between rider and bronc was on.

Sunfish had a whole bag of tricks and he used them all on this occasion. He sunfished and changed ends at a dizzying pace, while the watchers on the corral fence held their breaths. His bucking was hard and high, and a great cloud of dust rose in the corral, but the rider was undisturbed.

The dark-haired young puncher rode serene and smiling, apparently as unconcerned as though he were in a rocking chair. The watchers on the fence top admitted admiringly that this hombre sure knew how to stay in the saddle.

At last Sunfish admitted defeat, and stood still, lathered and panting. The young fellow grinned and looked up at the T Bar foreman, perched on the fence above him. "Now how about that job?" he asked.

"Guess we can't let a ridin'-fool like you go," replied Bill Parks. "If you think you c'n stay awake part of the time, you got a job punchin' cows for the T Bar right now. What's yore name, stranger?"

"Sam Hitchcock," replied the youth.

"Are you sure your mother didn't call you Sleepy Sam?" spoke up Harry Seymour innocently.

"Don't think she did," responded Sam.

Harry sighed. "She shore missed a good bet if she didn't!" he replied solemnly, a twinkle in his eye. And in this way the newcomer gained the title of "Sleepy Sam."

Sam soon proved that in any work to be done with rope, horse, or gun he could hold his own with the best of them. His merry good humor and friendliness soon made him a general favorite in the T Bar bunkhouse. But he had one peculiar and unfortunate characteristic—he was constantly falling asleep.

The puncher was the first to seek his bunk in the evening, and the last to rise in the morning, so it could not be insufficient slumber that bothered him. But just the same, in the evening at the bunkhouse, at the supper table, in town, or even while riding, occasionally, Sleepy Sam would feel a great drowsiness seize him, his eyes would grow heavy and his head would nod, and he would be gently wafted away to the land of dreams.

This peculiarity of Sam's was a source of amusement and perplexity to his companions. "Sam must have the sleepin' sickness," Harry suggested once.

Bill snorted. "Him!" he replied. "Trouble with Sam is, he was born asleep, and ain't ever been awake proper. He needs a stick of dynamite or somethin' to wake him up!"

But apparently this grand awakening had not yet taken place, for Sam continued as sleepy as ever.

The T Bar buckaroos took advantage of this trait occasionally to play a joke on Sam. It was the puncher's custom, on returning from a long day's outriding, to let the bronc find his way home. The effect of many hours in the saddle would make Sam drowsy, and he simply tied the reins to the saddle horn, bowed his head on his breast, and dozed. The intelligent cowpony, thus given his head, would easily find his way to the ranch house with the sleeping rider undisturbed.

But one day as the shadows were lengthening, Harry Seymour chanced to cross Sam's path. Sam was slumbering peacefully in the saddle, bowed forward at an acute angle, while his cowpony plodded sedately on.

"Looks like Sam's bronc is headed for home and supper," said Harry to himself. "Well, we got to put a stop to this!"

With a grin at his sudden idea, Harry took the reins of Sam's bronc and led him off the trail a few yards. There the puncher tied the reins to a yucca, at which Sam's bronc, a gentle animal for one of his breed, stood quiet and chewed at his bit.

Harry surveyed the scene, then chuckled. "Well, get set for a nice long wait, bronc," he advised the tied pony. "Sam won't wake up for a while yet!" With that he waved his hand gleefully at his slumbering pal, and went on toward the ranch house.

The pony stood patiently at the end of his tether, while the sun set and the stars came out. Occasionally the animal snorted and stamped his foot. But that did not disturb Sleepy Sam Hitchcock, who still sat doubled over the saddle horn. Peacefully as a babe he slumbered on.

It was ten o'clock when at last Sleepy Sam awoke. He was stiff and sore from his cramped position, and he stretched and yawned vigorously. Then he saw that

night had fallen and he was far from home.

"What's the matter with you, you wall-eyed cayuse?" inquired the sleepy puncher of his mount. "Why the deuce didn't you take me home?" He kicked the bronc in the ribs as a gentle reminder to move. The mount's vigorous response disclosed to Sam the fact that the bridle was securely tied. He unfastened it, with the thought that his pals had played a dirty trick upon him.

Stiff, hungry, and a bit more wakeful, Sleepy Sam took the trail toward the ranch house. "We've been framed by my own buddies, bronc!" he commented aloud.

The T Bar bunkhouse was dark and quiet when Sam arrived. After disposing of his bronc, he sneaked in quietly, hoping to avoid the gibes of his comrades over their joke.

"Guess I'll sleep some more now, under more favorable circumstances," reflected Sleepy Sam as he approached his bunk silently, his boots carried in his hand.

But it was not to be. Sleepy Sam threw himself into his bunk—and let out a groan. The other buckaroos had thoughtfully paved his bunk with a neat layer of small stones!

Sleepy Sam sat up again, rubbing his bruises where he had alighted on the stones. At the same moment a voice that was undoubtedly Harry Seymour's sounded out of the dark. "Who's the champeen sleeper of North America?" it asked in solemn tones.

"Sleepy Sam Hitchcock!" came the reply, yelled out by all the punchers of the T Bar.

"Who's the only hombre that could sleep on a hot stove without turnin' a hair?" asked Harry again.

"Sleepy Sam Hitchcock!" repeated the answering chorus.

"Go to hell!" cried Sam. He picked the stones out of his bunk and threw them in all directions. Muffled grunts and curses told him that some of the missiles found their mark among his comrades. Then, a pleased smile on his face, Sleepy Sam leaped once more into his bunk, pulled the covers over his head—and slept.

Then there was the time when Sam fell asleep at the supper table, with a forkful of food in his hand. When he awoke ten minutes later, Harry and Bill Parks, the foreman, decided to fool him.

"Well this sure was a fine breakfast this mornin'," asserted Harry, swallowing his coffee with a wink at his comrades.

"Yeah, the sun'll be up directly, and then another day's ridin' for us," replied Bill.

Sam rubbed his eyes and looked dazed. "Sunrise? Breakfast?" he asked wonderingly. "Why, I thought we was eatin' supper."

"Where you been?" cried the foreman severely, choking a chuckle. "Get the sleep out of yore eyes!" And so effectively did the buckaroos carry out the farce that Sam became convinced that it really was breakfast, and that in some way he had slept and lost track of the time. So he gulped his coffee and was already to the corral before he observed that the sun was setting, not rising, and that it was twilight. Then he returned with a grin on his face to meet the guffaws of the T Bar boys.

Thus occasionally the T Bar buckaroos fixed up a scheme for a joke on the sleepy puncher. Sam took them cheerfully enough, and sometimes repaid with a trick of his own. He knew that the jokes were all meant in a light-hearted spirit of fun, and received them accordingly.

But one evening there was a joke that was not so friendly, and then Sleepy Sam showed the steel that underlay his good humor. It was in Donahue, the cow town and railroad station twenty-five miles north of the ranch. The T Bar punchers, having received their month's pay that day, had ridden hard and far to blow it in at the town.

They entered Donahue with joyful whoops, and proceeded to rid themselves of their surplus cash. Sleepy Sam and Harry Seymour, his pal, headed for the Donahue Cafe and Soft Drink Emporium. Here one could gamble, and get soft drinks, or even drinks that were not so soft.

In a short time the two punchers were sitting in on a draw poker game. Three other men were in it, among them a lean dark individual with shifty eyes and a small mustache.

The betting was fairly heavy, and Sam's pile of chips began to dwindle. The puncher commenced to lose interest in the game, and a drowsiness settled on his eyelids. After all, what was poker compared to a good nap?

The shifty-eyed fellow dealt. Sam picked up his five cards and glanced at them casually with sleep-laden eyes. Then he threw them aside, face up, and leaned his head on his arms. "Count me out this hand," he murmured.

The hand was played while Sam dozed, and the shifty-eyed man won the pot with a king high straight. He pulled in the chips, and Harry, who was next dealer, started to gather the cards. Then he looked at Sam's hand, and stared with wonder.

"Well, I'll be hung!" cried Harry. "This idjit threw away the winnin' hand!" He shook Sleepy Sam into wakefulness.

"Yuh dreamy-eyed bonehead, look what you done!" he said, pointing. "You had a spade flush on the draw and you threw it away!"

Sam roused himself and viewed his discarded hand with chagrin. It was true; he had thrown away a spade flush and lost a half month's pay through his sleepiness. "Guess I musta not looked at those cards right," he said.

Harry Seymour was caustic. "How come you're punchin' cows, anyway?" he demanded. "You ought to just go to bed and stay there, like Rip Van Winkle!"

Bill Parks, who had just entered, now shook his head dismally. "That Hitchcock hombre was born dead, and he ain't never found it out yet," he pronounced. "When he does, he'll lay still like the rest of the dead ones!"

To these attempts at humor at his expense Sam replied with only a sheepish grin.

Then the shifty-eyed man across the table spoke up. A sneer was on his lips, and a harsh scornful note in his voice. "I'm thinkin' that the sleepy gent don't belong out here at all," he said mockingly, "out here on the range we need *men,* not sleepwalkers!"

The rough words and the insulting tone —on the instant Sleepy Sam rose to his feet, wakeful and calm. "Was you speakin' serious, stranger, or d'you mean that for a joke?" he inquired mildly. The other rose also, laughed, and turned his shifty eyes to Sam. "Well, what's the difference?" he responded coldly.

Sam's brown eyes narrowed, though he still smiled with his lips. "If you was jokin', it's all right," he said, "but if you was serious—we might have trouble, stranger!" Sam's voice was low, but there was a touch of steel in it, and his hand was not far from his gun-butt.

Of a sudden the room was still. The spectators observed the two guns which the shifty-eyed man wore with the ends of the holsters tied down. They opined there would be a gunfight shortly, and they edged over out of the danger zone. But after a moment of suspense, the shifty-eyed man shook his head. "I was just jokin'," he growled sullenly. He started for the doorway, but halfway there he paused. Swinging about, he returned to where Sleepy Sam was standing and peered at his face with a cruel, baffled light in his eyes.

"I want to remember your face, stranger," drawled the shifty-eyed man. "We might meet again sometime." And without another word he was gone.

The poker game broke up, and the T Bar men went out to get their broncs.

"Sam, you've made an enemy to-night," said Harry.

"And a bad one, too," added Bill Parks.

"You mean the shifty-eyed hombre, I guess," responded Sam. "Well, who is he?"

"That's Homer Lee, middle name bein' Rattlesnake," explained the foreman. "He runs a little one-horse outfit 'bout halfway between here and the T Bar. He don't do much cattle raisin'. But he's got a hard gang workin' for him, and they rustle some. And also, he's got a lightnin' draw and the heart of a wolf, so he's a bad man to monkey with."

"And he hates old man Hoskins like poison, too," added Harry.

Sleepy Sam yawned and laughed. "And now this Lee hates me like poison, too, what of it?" he said. "I ain't losin' no sleep over it! Let's go home to bed!" And so the

T Bar boys departed for the home ranch.

That was the last night in town for a while. The next week was a busy and interesting one on the T Bar Ranch.

First of all on Monday evening Blanche Hoskins returned home. When the punchers trooped in to supper the girl was there, seated at her father's side.

Blanche smiled and nodded her golden head. "Hello, boys," she said. "Did I surprise you?"

The T Bar punchers whooped and surrounded the girl, with eager questions and handclasps. "Back from yore aunt's at last, are you, Blanche?" asked the foreman.

"And we're all mighty glad of it, too!" added Harry.

Blanche Hoskins sat smiling at them all, her cheeks flushed with pleasure and her blue eyes sparkling. The punchers of the T Bar were all her friends. Each of them had been in love with Blanche at one time or another, but laughingly she had refused them all.

Sleepy Sam was the only stranger to her, and he was pushed forward and introduced.

The smile and the friendly glance which Blanche gave the new puncher on this occasion seemed to influence his appetite. At any rate, he ate very little for supper, and spent most of the meal looking across the table at the slim, laughing girl.

When supper was over and the punchers returned to the bunkhouse, Sam addressed his pal accusingly. "How come you never told me Hoskins had a daughter, Harry?" he asked.

"Didn't know you'd be interested," replied Harry. "Anyway, you know it now, don't you?"

But Sam was staring dreamily at the wall.

"Gee! I never saw a girl like that!" he said, half to himself. "With her big blue eyes, and golden hair, and—" he broke off suddenly with a flush, as he saw his pal staring at him amusedly.

"Sleepy Sam," cried Harry with mock seriousness, "are you goin' to fall in love?"

"Me?" snorted Sam. "I should say not! What d'you take me for, anyway? Girls don't bother me!" But just the same, Sam's sleep that night was restless and broken for the first time in years. Thoughts of Blanche Hoskins and mental visions of her cameo-like face and slim figure disturbed his slumbers.

But on the following evening the punchers of the T Bar saw a strange sight. Sleepy Sam did not retire to his bunk soon after sundown as usual. Instead, he plied razor, comb, and brush with great zeal, donned his best clothes, and gave a final flick at his already mirror-like boots. Then, whistling with affected carelessness, he started for the ranch house.

The boys in the bunkhouse were astonished at this unusual procedure. Harry Seymour pretended to reel fainting against the wall.

"Have I lived to see this day?" he cried. "Sam's bunk's callin' for him, and instead he's goin' callin'!"

But Sleepy Sam ignored this and other jibes, and proceeded to the ranch house. A little later he was seen sitting beside Blanche on the ranch house porch, and Sam certainly did not seem sleepy now.

Instead, with Blanche so close beside him, her blue eyes fastened upon him, Sam had never been more wide-awake in his life. His heart beat furiously, and a glow of exultation filled him.

But he gave no indication of his inner feelings to her. They spoke of commonplace things, the ranch, and the country, and so on. And all the while the puncher was thinking how wide and deep blue her eyes were, and how her golden hair glistened in the moonlight like a crown of gold.

When, after saying good-night, he retired to his bunk, he could not sleep. After restlessly tossing for hours, he rose, got his horse, and rode aimlessly across the broad windswept range till the sun rose. There was a vision of Blanche before his eyes and a fire in his heart as he rode. Sleepy Sam Hitchcock was in love.

When he returned to the ranch house for breakfast, his comrades greeted him with sighs and significant tappings of the forehead.

"I—I wasn't sleepy someway this mornin', so I went out for a ride," explained Sam.

"Boys, stay away from him," urged the foreman with a wink. "Either he's et loco

weed or he's in love, and either way he's dangerous!" And the chief topic of conversation among the buckaroos that day was the sleepy puncher and the great change that had so suddenly come over him.

Sleepy Sam was no less amazed at himself. He would never have thought it possible for such things to happen to him. Blanche Hoskins had in a brief space of time changed his whole life; he was no longer the same man.

So he went on, lovesick and too shy to tell about it. His sleepiness did not return; on the contrary he was the most wakeful person on the ranch. At any hour of day or night he might be found sitting somewhere, wide-awake —and thinking.

The boys remained amazed at the great change in him. They laid the blame for his wakefulness to everything from bad digestion to love, and Sam did not enlighten them as to the true cause.

Then came a Saturday that remained memorable in the history of the T Bar ranch. A new cook came to the outfit, and also a large sum of money arrived from the bank. And then that night—

But first came the events of the morning.

"Sam, drive Blanche to town for some shoppin'," directed Bob Hoskins. "And while you're there cash this check at the bank."

Sam looked at the check and whistled.

"Bein' as it's none of my business, what you goin' to do with a thousand dollars?" he asked.

"Bein' as you're too damn nosey, I'll tell you," replied the rancher grinning. "Part of it's for the payroll, and part for a payment on that new range I'm goin' to buy. Now get goin'!"

Soon Sleepy Sam was driving toward town, with the lady of his love beside him, and though his heart was full, he could find little to say to her.

At Donahue they separated. Sam went to the bank and Blanche to the store. Soon after the puncher returned to the wagon, an envelope of large bills in his hands. Blanche was there before him. Nearby stood Homer Lee, staring at her with a smirking grin.

At sight of the girl Sam smiled, but when he saw his enemy, he stiffened. He approached, eyeing Lee with cold hostility, which glance the gunman returned.

"Anyone been botherin' you, Miss Hoskins?" asked Sam pointedly as he climbed up on the seat beside her. "There's some no-'count hombres that don't do nothin' but loaf around this town and stare at girls," he added.

At this unmistakable reference to himself, Homer Lee straightened. "You're the sleepy puncher from the T Bar, eh?" he jeered. "Well, I'm goin' to have it out with you some day, stranger, but right now I sort of envy you. I sure would like to have what you got up there beside you."

Sam looked beside him on the wagon seat, and saw there both Blanche Hoskins and the bulging envelope of money. "Just which do you mean?" he demanded.

Lee laughed. "Maybe I want both," he replied, leering at the girl.

Sleepy Sam gazed down on his opponent and decided that if Lee's words were not insulting, then at least his expression was. However, this was not the place for gunplay. Reflecting on these thoughts, Sleepy Sam acted.

He leaped down from the wagon, and stood before the gunman with doubled fists. "Yore manners are bad, Lee," he drawled coldly.

The gunman reached toward his holster. At the same moment, Sam stepped forward and swung for the other's jaw. Lee went down, while Sam climbed back on the wagon again with a virtuous feeling of duty well done.

Without a word he started the horses, and the wagon rolled away toward the ranch. Blanche looked pale, and yet somehow pleased. "That man had the most terrible look in his eyes," she murmured.

"Appearances shore ain't decevin' in this case," Sam assured her, "'cause Lee is a bad actor all around."

She shivered slightly. "I'm glad you

came when you did," she said, her blue eyes upon him. Sam felt a sudden impulse to take her in his arms and tell her of his love. Then his courage ebbed, and all he could do was stammer and look away.

They returned to the ranch in time for supper—the first meal prepared by the new cook. The new man had come that afternoon, a stranger in the region, a fellow with a hard face and silent reserved manner. Being hard pressed for a cook, Hoskins had hired the new arrival on the spot.

The meal was of fair quality, all except the coffee, which was bitter. But since nearly all persons on the ranch were steady consumers of this beverage, they drank the disagreeable liquid regardless. The one exception was Blanche, who never touched coffee.

"You're not missin' anything tonight, Blanche," asserted her father with a wry face. "This stuff ain't fit for a mule to drink, but I'll drink it anyway." And he scowled at the cook, who scowled back unabashed.

Supper over, the punchers retired to the bunkhouse. A poker session was soon started, while Sam began to array himself for a call on Blanche. His heart beat fast, as it always did when he was about to go to see her. But mingled with this excitement was a strange weariness, a heaviness of the eyelids, which grew continually. Sam yawned and rubbed his eyes.

"Look there, boys," called Bill Parks, looking up from his chips, "Sleepy Sam's backslidin'! Up to his old tricks!" But apparently the yawn was contagious, for the foreman laid down his hand, and yawned and stretched also. And after that every one of the punchers followed suit.

The sleepiness grew among them and within ten minutes the whole T Bar bunkhouse crew were dead on their feet. At last Bill cast down his hand and arose. "I don't know what in blazes is wrong with me," he muttered, yawning. "But I do know I ain't been so tired for months, and I'm turnin' in right now!"

And he suited the action to the word, and the buckaroos followed his example. In short order, every last man was sprawled in his bunk, slumbering peacefully.

All except Sam. Though that puncher was dead tired, he forced himself to continue his preparations. He shaved and dressed and polished his boots, and all the while his drowsiness grew greater. He wondered dully what on earth was the cause of his weariness.

"Anyway, I'm goin' to break this nickname of Sleepy Sam," he said to himself. "I'm goin' up to call on Blanche, if I have to ram spurs into me to keep awake!"

But his drowsiness was too great. Polishing his boots, he knelt down on one knee, the other leg stretched before him. The mirror-like finish of the outstretched boot hurt his eyes, and he closed them. Then he leaned his bowed head against the wall—for just a second's rest—

When Sleepy Sam awoke everything was dark and still. There was no sound except the snoring of the sleepers in their bunks. He rose with a groan. His cramped position while asleep had made him stiff and sore, and caused him to awake. If he had been lying down he would have slept till morning.

Sam stretched himself and rubbed his cramped muscles. "Wonder if it's too late to go callin'?" he mused. "Anyway, I'll go up and see." He fumbled about on his bunk and in a moment he had fastened the silken neckerchief about his neck and the heavy gunbelt about his waist, with the gun on his thigh. Thus equipped, he was conventionally attired for a social call.

He emerged into the night, the cool air shocking him into a little more wakefulness. The stars were shining brightly, and by their position Sam rapidly calculated that the hour was long after midnight. "Too late now," he decided and turned back toward the bunkhouse. Then he paused.

There was a light in the ranch house, and voices and sounds of activity within. Something must be wrong! Sam suddenly stiffened, and moved forward noiselessly, tense and alert. The front door of the ranch house was slightly ajar, and toward

it he went quietyl. At last he stood by the door and cautiously peered in.

There was Homer! He was speaking. "Well, Joe, you did a good job of it," he said with a curt laugh. "Every last one of 'em is dead to the world for to-night! We could carry the ranch house away, and they wouldn't know it."

The hard-faced man who was the new cook came into view, grinning. "I doped that coffee plenty," he declared. "They kicked about the taste, but they all drank it, all except the girl."

Outside, understanding flashed into Sam's brain. That bitter coffee, the sudden sleepiness of the men—it was plain now! They had been drugged by Lee's confederate, so that Lee might swoop down and plunder the ranch house! What fools they all had been!

The third member of Lee's gang was at the tiny safe in the corner of the room, prying and pulling. Lee turned to him. "Ain't you got that thing open yet?" he demanded.

"Take it easy, we got plenty of time," replied his aide. "Anyway, I'll have it open in five minutes. It ain't any more'n a tin box." And there was a thousand dollars in currency in that tin box!

Sleepy Sam shook his head to dispel the drowsiness that crept over him again. That was sure a powerful drug! He rubbed his eyes, and hitched his gunbelt a trifle. He took a step forward.

At that moment Lee, ignorant of the silent watcher outside, had an idea. He turned to the cook, a gleam in his eyes. "The girl! Which is her room?" he demanded.

Silently the cook pointed to the right, to a door that led from the large front room. Lee approached the door slowly, a grin on his coarse face. He licked his lips.

"This girl was some high-and-mighty this mornin', when I seen her in Donahue," he said with a wink; "let's see if she's the same way now!"

The cook and the safe-cracker looked up with interest. "Guess she'll change her tune when you get hold of her!" laughed the cook.

Lee rattled the door. It was locked. He stepped backward, ready to hurl his bulk against the door, indeed, to smash it open.

And beyond that door was Blanche! Sleepy Sam felt the short hairs rise on the back of his neck. A wave of cold wrath surged over him and dispelled his drowsiness in an instant. He was wide awake now, and ready for action. Noiselessly he stepped forward and stood in the doorway, hand near gun-butt.

"Lee!" he cried.

Lee swung about as though something had stung him. He saw Sam Hitchcock framed in the doorway, and surprise and hatred leaped into his face. His two men turned also, and stood staring.

"Lee, to-day you mentioned you'd like to have what was beside me on the wagon—meanin' the money and Miss Hoskins," he drawled. "I see you've come fer 'em now. D'you think you'll take 'em away?"

There was a tense moment of waiting, while the chirping of insects outside resounded through the silence. Then Homer Lee, gunman, made his answer. With a snarl he went for his gun.

But Sam's right hand moved like a streak, and in an instant his six-shooter was out and roaring. Before Lee could level his revolver a bullet caught him in the shoulder, and he went down writhing. The cook, his hard face contorted with rage, leaped to one side, reaching toward his holster. But just as he brought his gun up, Sam fired again.

The cook's gun clattered to the floor, his stinging, bleeding hand dropped to his side, and he was out of the fight.

The third man did not delay. He wanted none of Sam's game. He left the safe with a frightened yelp, and rushed out of the side door into the darkness like a rabbit.

The whole affair was over in five seconds. Then there was quiet, with the fugitive's footsteps receding in the distance, the two wounded thieves glaring, and gun smoke curling toward the ceiling. Sam grinned and restored his gun to his holster.

"This way," he commanded his two captives. He forced them into the kitchen, with instructions to bind each other's wounds. The two were more angry than hurt, and Lee cursed violently until Sam half-drew his revolver and advised the gunman to hold his tongue. Then they be-

came sullen and silent. Jim locked the kitchen doors, and closed the heavy outside shutters, thus converting the room into a safe jail until next day.

Then with swift feet and bounding heart Sam went to Blanche's door. "Blanche," he called softly.

There was a stirring within. "Is it you, Sam?" came Blanche's low musical voice.

"Yes," said Sam. The lock clicked, the door opened, and Blanche came out. Her face was pale, and her starry blue eyes were wide. She grasped his hand, a glad smile coming to her lips. "You're safe, Sam! I heard the shooting—and Lee's voice! What was it?"

Sam told her briefly what had happened, holding her hand tightly the while. Then he gulped, took a grip on himself, and looked into her eyes. "I got somethin' to tell you, Blanche," he began. And then, by all the unlucky stars in the heavens, he yawned!

Blanche leaned back, shaking with laughter. "Sam! Sleepy Sam!" she cried, her eyes twinkling.

But Sam checked his yawn, and clasped her hands tighter. "I got somethin' to tell you, and I better say it 'fore I fall asleep," he said. "Blanche, I love you. Will you marry me?"

She looked at him with tenderness in her blue eyes, and without hesitation answered him.

"Yes, Sam," she said. "I will."

Then Sam forgot everything—his drugged sleepiness, the fight, the captives—everything but her. With a choked cry he crushed her in his arms, while his heart seemed to melt with joy. And as he held her so, the first gray of dawn came.

Sam kissed her, and smiled. "It's morning," he said.

"And Sleepy Sam's the only man awake on the ranch," she replied gaily, "and all the rest of them, even my father, slept through the gunfight and all, and never stirred!"

"Let's go wake them," suggested Sam. Arm in arm they went outside, and Sam got a bucket of ice-cold water at the pump. Then they went toward the bunkhouse.

"That drug might make the boys hard to rouse," laughed Sam, swinging the bucket, "so a little water might help them. I want to wake 'em and tell 'em of our comin' weddin'!" And he tightened his arm about her.

"And now they can't call you Sleepy Sam any more after this night!" she said, looking up at him. "They'll have to call you 'Wakeful!'"

Sam kissed her, with greater happiness than he had ever known surging through him. "I guess I'm woke up fer good now, Blanche," he said, "and you're the one that woke me!" And they went on, arm in arm, to tell all the ranch the glad news.

GRASSHOPPERS IN A GLACIER

WITH the announcement of the formal opening of the Yellowstone National Park schedule for June 19 the attention of the Summer vacationist is once more brought to this great wonderland of the West. Just across the park line, and not far from the quaint mining town of Cooke City, Mont., is the Grasshopper Glacier, which is being visited by tourists in increasing numbers each year.

Although geographical curiosities abound in the region, the glacier is among the most interesting. It is at the head of the fork of Rosebud River, in one of the boldest mountain regions on the continent, and is reached by horseback. Of unknown age, the glacier, pure white, extends about a mile. The upper covering is compact snow, the under layer blue ice. The foot of the glacier breaks off in a vast sheer ice wall, below which runs a river. On all sides are bare mountain peaks, the elevation of the midsection of the glacier being 10,500 feet.

A strange phenomenon gives the ice field its name. The surface to a considerable depth is filled with myriads of frozen grasshoppers. Traces of feet, legs, parts of the bodies and heads can be seen; at times complete unoxidized speciments can be obtained sound enough to serve as an angler's bait.

ROPING AN EAGLE

LASSOING a live eagle was recently accomplished by Jose Villalobo, a Mexican range rider on the North Concho River Valley ranch in the San Angelo section of Texas. The bird has been sent to the Texas A. and M. College. Riding the range in search of a lost sheep, Villalobo espied an eagle in a tree. The bird had a wing spread of eight feet.

The Flaming Trail

A WESTERN SERIAL ROMANCE

By

Frank C. Robertson

PART ONE

What is it that makes a man? Is it not the struggle, the everlasting effort, the will to fight and meet success or failure without flinching? In Mr. Robertson's new serial he runs the gauntlet of Western life. On the great green stage of the cattle country he creates a vital drama—a story that will find a place in your mind and heart.

CHAPTER I

BOUNCED!

"TIE it down, Georgie, there's a storm brewing," warned a cool, feminine voice.

Young George Mullins changed his carefree whistle to an abrupt laugh, and his expensive Panama came off the head of black hair combed back in the most approved manner of the modern sheik.

"Hello, Miss Grant," he said, "I'm properly rebuked. "Didn't happen to see you."

"Oh, it's not me you're to worry about, Mr. Mullins, but if you go into your father's office with that whistle blowing you are likely to come out on your ear," Miss Grant said calmly, and in a tone that implied that it did not much matter.

That tone intrigued Georgie. He was not altogether unfamiliar with the furnishings of the Mullins Livestock Commission Company, but Laura Grant had heretofore simply been part of those furnishings, nothing more. Now he discovered that his father's private secretary was rather young for such a responsible position, rather good-looking, with a pair of grey eyes that were remarkably clear and far seeing, and hair that was a deep, warm red without being fiery.

It occurred to Georgie to wonder what kind of a girl she was. Heretofore his experience with girls had been confined to

those he had met socially. That had covered a wide range; from the daughters of millionaires he met in drawing rooms to those he took on wild rides and wilder parties. But working girls were strictly beyond his ken.

"I was in a boxing match the other night and my ear is still sore, so I'll take your warning," he grinned.

"I think your father is waiting for you," Miss Grant said a trifle austerely as he showed a disposition to linger by her desk.

"What's time to a millionaire?" George laughed. "You know, Miss Grant, I've never had time to get really acquainted with you and——"

"You never had less time than you have right now," she cut him off. "I'm afraid Mr. Mullins is really angry with you. You had better not keep him waiting."

"But after I've had my lecture—can I stop and get a little acquainted with you then?" he pleaded.

Laura hesitated a moment. "Yes," she said then, "you can stop here when you come out—if you want to."

"I'll be right back," he promised eagerly.

Miss Grant smiled to herself. Georgie, she knew, was going to be in an entirely different mood when he came out. She had been surprised when his father had taken her into his confidence about Georgie the day before. She had even ventured to put in a word in the young man's behalf, but she knew what he was going to get. And she was curious to know just how he was going to take it.

In the inner office young Georgie was confronting his parent. Although nearly sixty years of age, Albert Mullins was still much of a man. His cheeks were rosy with health, though his hair was iron grey, and his two hundred pound frame had not yet run to fat. He was not so much heavier than his son at that. They were duplicates in build, but where the older man possessed the square face of the natural fighter, Georgie's was inclined to be long and a bit intellectual, though Georgie himself would have been the first to deny such a charge. Secretly Albert Mullins had resented the lack of pugnaciousness in his son's face, as he had resented his son's actions.

"Well, you got here at last," the senior Mullins sneered.

"It would seem so," Georgie replied, instantly aloof and hostile. When the boy was younger Mullins had tried to rule him by force, and as he grew older and more incorrigible the parent had resorted to sneers and abuse, which had not increased his authority over an admittedly wayward son.

"It may interest you to know that I've had a private detective trailing you for the past three months. I know exactly what you've been doing. You're a wastrel, young man, and not worth the powder and shot it would take to blow you to hell."

"You're a plain speaker at any rate, Dad," George said. His face had gone white, and his lips closed to a thin line. But so had his father's.

"It's a trick I learned when I lived among real men," Mullins said coldly. "When I was your age I was carrying my blankets along the railroad track looking for a job. I humped my back over a pick and shovel, I punched cows, and I herded sheep, I—"

"Yes, I know the whole story—by heart," George cut in. "You punched cows and got the daughter of a rich packer stuck on you and when you married her your father-in-law backed you in the sheep business and you got to be a millionaire."

A dull flush of rage came over Albert Mullins' face. He prided himself that he was a self-made man, and now this impudent son was intimating that it was his backing that had made him.

"I suppose you think it was easy for me to get where I am," he said thickly.

"I think you enjoyed it," George stated correctly.

But Albert Mullins liked to look back upon the adventures of his youth and call them hardships. "You do, eh?" he sneered. "Well, I'm going to see how you enjoy it. I am sending you out to my Idaho ranch to herd sheep for a solid year. You never earned an honest dollar in your life, and you won't get a cent except what you earn from now on until you prove you're worth something."

"The position is declined with thanks," Georgie said.

"Huh? Do you realize that you'll never get another dollar from me? And I can promise you your brother won't be any more lenient."

"I'm sure of that," Georgie smiled bitterly. He had no illusions about the charity of his brother Edgar.

"And you mean you won't go?" Mullins demanded incredulously.

"Positively. I'm not a sheepherder."

"Then—then I'm through with you," Albert Mullins roared. The millionaire's voice was tinged with fear. He had not expected this calm opposition and it worried him. George, he was firmly convinced, was no good; but he had not expected him to show any signs of character, and he was a little afraid of the result. Yet he was far too obstinate to draw down.

"All right. I presume there's no more to be said," Georgie said lightly as he withdrew from the room.

He had expected a severe lecture, but nothing like this. And the knowledge that his father had stooped to having him followed by a detective was the most bitter dose of all. He had almost passed Miss Grant by before he remembered his promise. He smiled at her gamely.

"Say, you're a prophetess," he told her. "I haven't got my wind back yet."

"You'll have plenty of time for that when you are herding sheep," she smiled.

"I wonder. The truth is I declined the job. Did the governor tell everybody in the office what he was going to offer me?"

"No, I think he only mentioned it to me."

"I suppose you think I'm pretty rotten."

"I wouldn't say that, but I gather that you've been pretty wild," she said.

"Say, Miss Grant, join me to-night and I'll show you just how wild I can be," he said mockingly.

"What's the object?" she asked.

"I got a few hundred dollars of the old man's money in my pockets that I've got to get free from in the most expeditious manner possible."

"And then what?"

"*Quien sabe?*" he laughed. "The question is, will you go with me?"

"I believe I will," Laura Grant answered upon impulse. She gave him her address, and he promised to call for her at eight. She knew that she was going to see a slice of life that was utterly unfamiliar to her, but she cared little about it. She was more anxious to see how Georgie Mullins was going to react to adversity. She knew much more about him than he knew about her. She had been obliged to listen to the report of the private detective, and despite it all she somehow liked Georgie, wild and worthless as she knew him to be.

And Georgie, on his part, was especially glad to have his father's private secretary with him on this last hectic evening, and he hoped she would carry a faithful report back to his father. He realized that one part of his young career was at an end. He had no idea what he was going to do, but he was determined to take no more money from his father, and he was going to get rid of what he had in one big splurge.

CHAPTER II

One Hectic Night

GEORGIE called for Laura promptly at eight o'clock. The neighborhood was far from being the best one in Chicago, but Georgie made no attempt to conceal his admiration for the girl. Her clothes had not cost a great deal of money, but they were tasteful and brought out such a degree of beauty that Georgie was dumbfounded that he had not discovered it in the office. And she looked so sweet and innocent that he almost repented of the program he had arranged.

"Where do we go first?" she asked brightly.

"We pick up the bunch, have a few drinks, and then proceed to celebrate," he said.

"Please, I don't want to drink," she objected.

"All right," he conceded. She was going to be a killjoy, but he was rather grimly glad of it. She would be able to turn in a more horrified report.

"The bunch" proved to be all that Laura's imagination had pictured them. The men in evening dress were, she thought, typical of the kind of friends Georgie would have.

The women interested her far more—and much more than she did them.

"If you don't drink and you don't smoke, how are you going to enjoy little Georgie's party, dearie?" one of them asked her.

"I'm doing fine, thank you," Laura returned suavely.

There was no doubt of the success of the party as it moved from one cabaret to another, and finally wound up at a notorious roadhouse. Georgie was unquestionably reckless, yet he was not so drunk as his friends, and, though he made no overtures to Laura, he kept he under observation most of the time, and occasionally favored her with his sardonic grin.

"Haven't you had enough?" she managed to ask once.

"I've got forty dollars yet," he replied. "Come on and dance."

Laura danced well, and in that respect she was no impediment. "Say, you've got it all over these other janes," Georgie remarked with some surprise.

"Don't you think maybe your father was right—that these people are not worth while?" she queried.

"Oh, well, I'm done with them after tonight, the same as I am with him. But I'm darned sorry I've just got acquainted with you."

"Why don't you take your father's advice?"

"Herd sheep?" He laughed aloud.

"It might not be so bad. It would be honest work at any rate, and you would earn your money—if you got it."

"Don't think much of me, do you?" he queried.

"I'm not infatuated," she retorted dryly.

She wondered if she had insulted him as he remained silent. Then she saw that his gaze was fixed upon three men who were just being seated at a table. With a start she recognized the tallest of the men.

"That Westerner was in the office yesterday. His name is Hanford, and he brought in thirty car loads of beef steers."

"Customer of—of Mullins. I see. Well, he stands to lose the price of those steers if he trails around with those two gangsters," Georgie said cynically.

"Gangsters!"

"Two of the worst," he replied. "Their game is to catch rich outlanders and pretend to show them the town. Then they get their money if they have to croak them."

"You have learned a lot of things—that you shouldn't know—haven't you?" the girl queried softly. "But you are not going to let Hanford be robbed, are you?"

"Me? Why should I make an enemy of Muff Munsen and get myself killed to save a customer of Mullins?"

Laura suddenly freed herself from his arms, and before he knew what she was doing, she had made her way to the table occupied by the three men—the cattleman from the West, and the two gangsters. Reluctantly George Mullins followed her.

"Don't you remember me, Mr. Hanford?" she asked. "I am Mr. Mullins' private secretary."

The cattleman looked up stupidly. His eyes were red from recent dissipation, but he was not really drunk. He rose gallantly. "Don't know's as I remember you, miss, but I'm proud tuh know yuh."

"And I am George Mullins," George said, extending his hand.

"Oh, son o' the old he one?" Hanford asked.

George laughed. He was inclined to like this bluff Westerner. "I've got to plead guilty, though he isn't so keen about claiming relationship to me."

"Well, come out to the ranch sometime, an' we'll make a man o' yuh," Hanford invited.

"Maybe I will, but right now I'm entertaining a good crowd, and I'd like to have you join us. I'll promise to take you back to your hotel."

"Sorry, Mullins, but we're showing Mr. Hanford the sights, and we've got a lot of places yet to go," "Pinky" Garfinkle cut in.

Georgie did not misunderstand. These two were formidable gangsters, expert gunmen who gave their victims no chance. He was being warned not to interfere.

"I hope you'll pardon me, gentlemen, but I have particular reasons for wanting to entertain Mr. Hanford the rest of the night."

"These ain't business hours, Mullins. Forgit it," Muff Munsen said hoarsely.

"That's the reason I insist upon Mr. Hanford staying with us," George smiled grimly.

Five years of Chicago night life had given him a wide acquaintance among the city's best known gangsters, but this was the first time he had ever crossed one of them. The penalty, as he very well knew, would be a bullet some dark night in the very near future. He was in the mood not to care.

"You will stay, won't you, Mr. Hanford? I'm very anxious to talk with you about the West," Laura said gushingly.

"Why shore," Hanford accepted. "You gent's 'll have tuh excuse me."

The two gunmen arose with cold smiles. "We'll see you later, Hanford—and you, Mullins," Garfinkle said.

"Oh, sure," George said carelessly, but there was a cold feeling inside of him. This final celebration had taken a most unexpected turn from the hilarious affair he had contemplated. But, having gotten Hanford out of the hands of the gunmen, he proceeded to leave the cattleman in the hands of Laura Grant while he flung himself into the revelries of the evening. The hilarity had begun to lag, but Georgie proceeded to enliven it.

Three hours later fully two-thirds of the guests were dead to the world. George came over to the table where Laura and the cattleman had been sitting alone for some time. His cheeks were badly flushed, and his eyes blood-shot.

"Too bad ole man's 'tective can't shee me now, eh, Laura?" he remarked.

"Possibly he is here somewhere," Laura retorted.

"Hope so," George laughed. "Guv'nor told me to go to hell—want him to know I lef' flamin' trail."

Bill Hanford surveyed the young rich man's son with cynical, amused eyes, but the girl looked grave.

"You're a foolish boy, George," she said. "Why don't you go home now and be a man? You've made a grand finish of your old life."

"I'm finished al' ri'," George chuckled. "Haven' got dollar lef'." He suddenly seemed to remember something. "Don' matter much, though, 'cause Muff Munsen an' Pinky Garfinkle gonna shoot me anyhow." He finished with a maudlin laugh.

"If you're broke let's go home," Laura urged.

"Nope—done with home," George refused.

"Put up with me to-night," Hanford suggested. "We'll take Miss Grant home and then go on to my hotel."

It required considerable argument to get George to consent, and then he insisted upon first making a speech.

"Ladies an' gentlemen: this is firs' an' las' speech o' li'l Georgie Mullins. Want tuh tell everybody jus' had painful operation—cut off from gov'nor's bank account. Spent las' dollar tuh-night on fair weather frien's. Ain' no other kin'."

"Hear! Hear!" applauded that part of his audience that was still awake.

"Never did obey Scriptures till tuh-night," George went on. "But tuh-night eat, been drunk, an' got merry. To-morrow gonna die. Goo'-night, kin' fair weather frien's—an' goo'-bye."

George sat down amid a chorus of drunken cheers.

He yielded readily enough to the efforts of Laura and the cattleman to get him away. There was a number of smart cars in front of the roadhouse, and the three made their way toward George's car, the young millionaire's son in the middle because he experienced great difficulty in standing erect.

George's car was unmistakable, but, as they were about to enter, Laura's keen eye observed a slight difference in the chauffeur. His cap and coat were the same, and, apparently, he was about the same size; but his manner was different. He was surly instead of deferential. That might be accounted for because of the long wait, but Laura had a strange feeling that it was not the same man at all.

The girl was not ignorant of the ways of some of the city's notorious gangsters, and she had been worrying all evening about the consequences to Georgie of their interference with Garfinkle and Munsen.

She acted purely upon intuition, but as they got into the car she whispered to Hanford: "Follow me. Make no noise, and don't let George make any."

As soon as they were seated the car began to roll slowly away. But it had not gone ten feet before they were stopped by traffic. The girl opened the door on the side opposite the one they had entered and stepped out carefully. She caught George as Hanford half threw the young fellow out, and they stood in the street as the car rolled away, with the chauffeur's eyes fixed firmly on the front.

"Get a taxi," Laura whispered hurriedly to the cattleman.

"Look here, Miss Grant, wha's big idea?" George demanded. "Wasn't that my car?"

"No. You don't own any car—you don't own anything," Laura replied unfeelingly.

Presently Hanford returned with a taxi, and before they had ridden ten minutes George was sound asleep.

"Pretty poor material they raise here in these cities," Hanford remarked.

"He's never had a chance," Laura defended promptly. "Albert Mullins might know how to raise a son out in the West where he spent his young manhood, but he knows nothing about it in the city. He's spoiled George, and then made him rebellious trying to change him."

"Maybe you're right," Hanford admitted. "Old Mullins was a Tartar himself in his young days. Fact is, he was never none too popular—and isn't yet."

The girl turned to him with surprise. "But why not? I thought he was a man of great influence out there."

"He is. Any man with lots of money is bound to be. But they hate him just the same."

"Do you?"

"I can't say I love him," Hanford laughed with a tinge of bitterness. "But I don't hate him—exactly."

"You shipped your cattle to us," she charged.

"Surely. I ship where I can get the most money, and the Mullins people know their business here."

"Why don't they like him?"

"He's your boss, young lady, and I won't start any argument with you," Hanford smiled. "I owe you too much. I had no idea those so-called guides who picked me up were gangsters."

"Your thanks are due to George," the girl said, not altogether truthfully. "And if he stays in the city he will likely pay for his interference to-night."

"We can't have that," Hanford said. "Do you think," he said, recurring to a long conversation they had had in the roadhouse, "that I could hold him in the West even if I could git him out there?"

"He won't have any money until he earns it. You can keep him for a while."

"All right, I'll rope him now, an' hog-tie him later," the cattleman promised with a grin.

The taxi stopped in front of Laura's home, and the girl and the cattleman got out.

"I'm mighty proud to have met you, Miss Grant," Bill Hanford said earnestly. "I reckon if I could have met a girl like you before it was too late I might not have been single to-day."

"You are not old—and there's plenty of girls, Mr. Hanford," Laura said in some embarrassment.

"But only one *you*," Hanford said boldly. "And by the looks of things your heart belongs to young Mullins here."

"You are mistaken, Mr. Hanford. Until yesterday I have scarcely passed a dozen words with Georgie Mullins, though of course I have seen him quite often in his father's office, and heard a great deal more about him," Laura said.

Hanford suddenly had her hand. "Miss Grant, this may seem a bit raw to you," he said nervously, "but I ain't got much time and I've got to get it off my chest. I've fell for you hard. You're an attractive girl, and you've got sense. You're the kind of a life partner I'd like to have. No, I'm not proposing to you. You don't know enough about me. But I want to write to you, and one of these days I want you to come out to my ranch and look things over. Then, if you ain't too much disappointed, I'd like another talk with you."

There was no mistaking the man's sincerity. Surprised though she was, Laura looked at him with renewed interest. He was far from being an old man, and he was not bad looking; neither was he illiterate. And in her secret soul the girl had always wanted to live on a ranch in the open.

"I—I—don't know what to say to you, Mr. Hanford, but—but you may write," Laura gasped, and, freeing her hand, she fled into the house.

CHAPTER III

A Quick Decision

THERE was no question of Albert Mullins' standing in the livestock world. He was a big man. In the commission business he was a dreaded figure, for no one knew just what price manipulations the old man was going to pull off. With an ear closer to the centers of production than any of his rivals, he was able to anticipate market fluctuations just a trifle before they did. But none of them held any particular personal animosity toward him.

On the range it was different. Despite the fact that the Mullins Commission Co. was a big institution of its kind, most of his capital was still tied up in the West, the scene of his earliest and greatest business triumphs. And here he was known as Al Mullins, and men hated him for his grasping, covetous, successful enterprises. Few of them knew anything about his background of bitter, biting poverty that had made him resolve at a very early age to succeed, in a financial way, at any cost. They knew only how he had come up from the bottom by forcing other men down, and, as they contended, by virtue of his father-in-law's millions. Yet the wisest of the old timers knew that it was Al Mullins' native force that was mostly responsible for his success.

Few people knew Al Mullins more intimately than Laura Grant. Five years' acquaintance as stenographer and private secretary had made her familiar with his history and his moods. Long ago she had learned that a cold twinkle in his eye meant disaster for some competitor. He gloated openly, and there were times when the girl rather wished he would suffer defeat so that he could know what disappointment meant.

So far as she could see the only real trouble in his life came from his son George; and yet reports of petty losses from his ranges always threw him into a furious rage. It was only reasonable, therefore, that Laura had very little personal sympathy for her employer.

As Laura sat down to her breakfast, she glanced casually at a morning paper, but a moment later she stiffened in astonishment as a headline caught her eye.

"YOUNG MILLIONAIRE VICTIM OF GUNMEN"

The name of George Mullins stared at her from the sub-title, and she devoured the story eagerly.

Young Mullins, according to the story, had given a wild party at the Golden Dome Inn. He had been seen to quarrel with two notorious gunmen. He had left the party in his own car, in company with a woman and another man. Later his car had been found abandoned, riddled with bullet holes, and the chauffeur of the car had been discovered bound and gagged a short distance from the Golden Dome Inn. According to the chauffeur's story he had been attacked while waiting for his employer, and his coat and cap had been taken from him.

The theory advanced by the police was that the masquerading chauffeur had driven the car to a place where the assassins waited. Young Mullins had then been murdered, and his body removed and hidden.

A sweeping search was being made for the body of the young society man, and also for the couple last seen with him. Other members of the party had been interviewed, and they all had stated that the couple were strangers to them. The article closed with the significant rumor that young Mullins had quarreled violently with his father. The senior Mullins had refused to talk for publication.

Laura's breakfast had suddenly become tasteless. What had actually happened

was no great mystery to her. The imposter chauffeur had indeed driven the car to an appointed rendezvous, and it had been punctured with bullets before the gangsters discovered that it was empty. She felt a lively thrill at realizing she had saved George's life. A moment later came realization that she had perhaps saved her own and Bill Hanford's as well, for they would have been killed as incidental to the gunmen's main object.

She sobered a bit more when she reflected that the police were searching for her and Hanford. It was not pleasant to be mixed up in such a mess. Yet they did not know who she was, and doubtless George would come forward and announce himself alive before her part was discovered.

She proceeded a bit furtively to the office, and breathed a sigh of relief when she was once more at her desk.

Ten minutes later Albert Mullins came in. Laura looked up at his massive frame curiously. His lips were pinched together a bit tighter than usual, and his eyes were inclined to roam furtively as though with a sort of self-consciousness, but otherwise he showed no signs of emotion.

Laura wondered if she should not be kind and tell him the truth at once to relieve his anxiety, but at that moment the assistant manager came in and made a bungling attempt to express his sympathy.

"Don't sympathize with me," Mullins barked. "He only got what was coming to him. He might have known that the kind of people he associated with could only bring his ruin. I warned him. What about that Boise shipment?"

Laura promptly sealed her lips. "Serve him right if George should keep him in suspense," she commently secretly.

That afternoon, just before closing time, Laura received a note brought by a messenger boy.

"Dear Miss Grant: We are on our way West. We have read the papers and laughed. The boy wants to keep everything dark. Be a good sport, will you, and let the old boy sweat for a while? He needs it. And the other party will be all right.

"I'm not forgetting your promise to me, and I'll soon be letting you know how we come out. Bill H."

There was a postscript in another hand.

"It's a funny world, isn't it? Not yet decided whether you did me a favor or not, but if there should be any trouble just whistle and I'll come a-running. G."

For a long time Laura sat musing over the note, but strangely enough it was the postscript which interested her most. George Mullins himself interested her, and unquestionably the young man had come to a jumping off place. His future depended upon the events of the next few months. If he could get a hold of himself and find some new interest in life she felt there was hope for him. If not, he was done.

It was not a bad thing, she concluded, for him to drop out of sight and let people think he was dead.

Albert Mullins' door opened and he passed by the girl with scarcely a glance. Laura was shocked to see that his face had grown drawn and haggard through the day. For the first time she felt pity for him, and was momentarily tempted again to tell him his son was alive. But she remembered that all through the day there had been telephone calls relative to the latest gangster outrage, and to each and sundry Mullins had stated that he had no sympathy for his son.

"Stubborn old beast," Laura murmured as she watched him pass out of sight.

She went home very hurriedly that night, and kept her face in the shadow as much as possible.

The supposed murder of young Mullins was the sensation of the city for a week, or until some other affair came along to claim the head lines. The police had searched diligently, but found no trace of the body. Pinky Garfinkle and Muff Munsen were "detained" over night, but there was no evidence against them until the *corpus delicti* could be obtained, and they were allowed to go. Both gangsters stoutly denied that they had quarreled with the rich young man. In spite of it, all public opinion believed that George Mullins had been murdered.

The failure of the police to locate the

mysterious couple last seen with George was the principal feature of the case after the first day. Reading about herself each day was a new sensation for Laura, and some of the things she read made her smile. No two of the people she had met at George's party agreed in their description of her. The police were searching for a woman among the class George habitually associated with. No one apparently thought to look for her among working girls.

Despite the discrepancies in description, Laura occasionally wondered that Albert Mullins did not become suspicious of her. But he, too, seemed imbued with the same idea as to the identity of the strange couple, and so she went totally unsuspected.

Ten days after the tragedy, Albert Mullins summoned his private secretary into his private office.

"No routine this morning, Miss Grant," he said. "I've decided to go West. There seems to be a fight on out there and I need a rest—and a fight. So I'm going to start to-morrow."

"Yes, sir," Laura said dutifully.

"I'll want a secretary with me. I prefer to work with you, but if you don't want to go, I'll get a man."

The suddenness of the suggestion took the girl's breath. She saw endless complications looming up if Mullins went West at that time, but she found also that she wanted to be there herself.

"You'll have to make your decision quick," Mullins said gruffly. "I want people to act promptly." It was the old, domineering way that had made him enemies, and alienated his youngest son.

"All right," Laura said crisply, "I'll go."

She hardly dared to ask how far it was from the Mullins holdings to the Hanford ranch.

CHAPTER IV

Georgie Goes West

PASSENGER train No. 41 roared into the little range metropolis of Pebble at five o'clock in the morning. Very few of its eight hundred people had begun to stir. There was not a three story house in the town, and it conveyed an impression that the paint dealers had not done a very thriving business for a long time. All in all, it seemed a sleepy town, and the only thing that promised activity was the low rows of pens that composed the stockyards. For Pebble, despite its size, was one of the largest shipping centers in the West.

Bill Hanford and young Georgie Mullins were the only passengers to get off the train that morning. George cast a speculative glance at the cedar-clad hills which crowded down upon the town from three sides, and buttoned his coat tightly about him.

"Bu-r-r, what a climate!" he ejaculated. "Hie me quickly to a stove."

Bill Hanford laughed. "This country'll make a man o' yuh, George. In a month yuh'll take a mornin' like this with yore coat off an' your shirt open. Six thousand feet altitude an' the best damn range country that lays outdoors."

"And this is where my respected sire made his pile, and endured those colossal hardships he likes so much to brag about," George murmured as he looked about him curiously. His eyes suddenly lighted upon a great white barn a couple of blocks away. Upon the roof in big letters were the words:

"ALBERT MULLINS & COMPANY, INC."

"Small chance for the passing stranger to fail to see that," George commented.

"No more chance than for the stockmen in this country to ignore the Mullins herds when they try to corner all the range," Hanford remarked. It was not the first time George had heard his new friend speak bitterly of the Mullins interests.

"I fancy the governor takes about all he can grab," George said. "Where do we hunt the fire?"

"There's the Idanha, the best hotel in the town, controllin' interest owned by Albert Mullins," Bill pointed out.

George gave the rather pretentious brown structure a critical glance. "Then let's find another place," he said.

A few minutes later the two men were

warming themselves by a huge base burner that held a night fire in the Occidental Hotel.

At one side of the lobby was the hotel bar where, ostensibly, only soft drinks were retailed. A few minutes after the two men entered the bartender came up from the cellar.

"Hello, Bill, when did you git back?" he greeted.

"Just blew in, Mike. How's the town?" Hanford answered.

"Purty excited, Bill. Fred Smith was killed day before yesterday, and there was a killin' over at the Caribou last night."

Hanford swung over by the bar. "Fred Smith? Why, there wasn't a more harmless feller in this country! Who got him?"

"Nobody knows. Some of Mullins' outfit, of course. The killin' at the Caribou was caused by 'Dutch' Klepper, one of Fred's men, accusin' a bunch of Mullins' campmovers of killin' Fred. In the ruckus that followed, Dutch killed one feller and wounded another. Then he took to the hills, an' they ain't landed him yet," the bartender explained.

"Well, something like that was to be expected," Bill Hanford said.

"There's a lot of people would like to see old Al Mullins himself come back out here—if they could git their hands on him," the bartender vouchsafed. "Come up an' have a drink—you an' your friend."

"Mike, this is a friend o' mine from the East, young Lyons. If yuh got any local pugilistic prides, trot 'em out."

"Prizefighter, huh," the bartender said as he shook hands. "Don't know's this is a very good place to ply your trade, young feller. Most people out here do their fightin' with a gun."

"Well, I'm on a vacation," George smiled. He had had no intention of posing as a boxer. He had told Hanford about some of the amateur boxing contests he had participated in, and he was really good with the gloves, but he had not thought of boasting of his ability in that line. And the name had been an invention of Hanford's, and not such a bad one at that, George had to admit. After all, perhaps it was just as well to pose as a pugilist as anything else. Boxing was the one thing he really knew how to do.

"Well, you look husky enough, but you must be damn clever or else not had much experience for I don't see many marks on you," Mike said bluntly.

"I don't claim to be so good," George said, and the subject was changed. There were other things of greater interest to the other two men.

After listening a few minutes to the conversation of the two men George had a better idea of what people really thought of his father. He heard nothing to flatter any member of the Mullins family. He observed, too, that Hanford's attitude toward him had changed considerably. The cattleman had left nothing to be desired in his treatment thus far, but now it seemed to George that he had become unimportant. Hanford's mind was taken up with range matters, and he had no further time to bother with a pilgrim from the city. George even wondered if Hanford's interest in him was not solely because he saw a chance to stick a thorn in the side of his enemy; for there could be no doubt that Hanford shared in the common hatred of Albert Mullins.

Some time later the two were seated at breakfast together. "If I get you right, Hanford, the governor is inclined to hog this whole country for himself?" George asked bluntly.

"You got me right, son," Hanford admitted. "Understand me, I ain't holdin' it ag'in' you."

"Naturally. But tell me what he's up to."

"I'd rather you found out for yoreself, but maybe I can give yuh a little line on things. Draw a straight line for twenty-five miles east and west of here, an' then run northeast the same distance or more from them two points an' you've taken in the cream o' the open range that's still left. There's ranches scattered here an' there through it, old time cattle ranches mostly. The men who own 'em have used that range for years without a great deal o' trouble. Part of it's been sheep range, but the lines have been understood till your people begun to buy up a few of the old

cattle ranches an' insert sheep on the range."

"That don't sound so outrageous so far," George said.

"It was all right in small doses, but Mullins has been gittin' hold of ranch after ranch, not adjoinin' ranches understand, but here an' there so that he can run his damned sheep between. Little by little he's been crowdin' us cattlemen off the range we've used for years," Hanford said hotly.

"I can see him doing that," George said grimly.

"This Fred Smith, for instance, was as decent a man as ever straddled a horse. For two years now he's had tuh steadily cut down his herd as Mullins crowded on to him—an' now they've killed him." For the first time George detected an unfriendly gleam in Hanford's eye.

"Has there ever been an organized effort to fight him?" George queried.

"No. He whips us one at a time. He ain't bothered me much yet, but I can see my time comin'. That's why I'm cuttin' down my stock."

"You promised to give me a job at regular wages," George said suddenly. "If you'll let me use my time to fight the governor on this business, I'll dispense with the wages. Are you game?"

Hanford stared at the smiling youth across the table for a long time. "You mean that?" he demanded finally.

"I never meant anything more seriously in my life," George said soberly.

CHAPTER V

The Strenuous Life

A LOT of things can be mastered in ten days if one has some native ability toward the thing desired, and the grit to stay with it.

Georgie Mullins had both.

In that time Georgie had innured himself to the saddle, he had learned to cast a rope with just a small measure of accuracy, and he had become proficient enough with a six-shooter that he could occasionally hit the mark he shot at.

He was thoroughly interested and, as Bill Hanford phrased it, he became "a hog for work." Those ten days strenuous apprenticeship served him well, for at the end of that time he was flung headlong into the spring round-up.

Georgie for the first time in his life found himself doing a man's work—and liking it.

"Reckon we'd just as well let that name o' Pug Lyons stand, that is, if you're willin' tuh take chances on somebody callin yore bluff about prizefightin'," Bill Hanford remarked.

"Suits me," Georgie grinned. "It won't be the first time I've been licked."

If Georgie had thought he was working before, he quickly discovered his mistake. Rolling out of his warm blankets at four-thirty to shiveringly dress and eat breakfast while his hands were so cold he could scarcely hold his plate; then out to the corral to catch a horse and ride like a maniac until after noon; swallow a hasty dinner and work like a Trojan until the last calf was branded; perhaps help move a bunch of bawling cows and calves to some other part of the range; back to the mess wagon for a twilight supper; an hour or so of grateful ease around the campfire; then into his blankets to turn over (once as it seemed to him) before beginning it all over again.

The first two afternoons Georgie helped hold the unbranded stuff while the branding was going on, but the third day the boss of the round-up collared him as he was going to catch a fresh horse.

"Hey, you, Pug, you look like a husky—suppose you try rastlin' calves fer a change."

Dutifully Georgie trailed the boss into the hot, dusty circle where the ropers were already beginning to drag one calf after another, caught dextrously by a hind leg. It was George's job to seat himself flat on the ground, jam one boot hard against a calf's leg just above the hock, while he held on like grim death to the other one, holding the suffering animal helpless while the hot iron seared through the hide on its ribs, and a keen-bladed knife finished the work of mutilation.

There were times when he missed his hold for a second, usually long enough for

the calf to viciously kick some part of his anatomy. At first the smell of burning hair and flesh nauseated him, the clouds of dust choked him, the blood repulsed him, and the dirt that settled upon him until his face was hideous, disgusted him. He stuck it out because he was ashamed to quit, but he did not call it a pleasurable existence.

They kept him at the calf wrestling job every day. His muscles became so sore they were tender to the slightest touch, but presently he began to harden, and the grime of the branding corral grew less and less offensive. He began to enjoy the hard ride each forenoon, "on circle."

But while he was getting hardened in to the work it was natural that he should also be forming friendships and animosities. Almost from the first day he began to chum up with a long, lean cowpuncher by the name of Adam Sheets. Adam was one of the best ropers at the rodeo; going quietly about his business and seldom missing a calf. He rarely had anything to say in a crowd, and was the only roper who did not try to cause Georgie to come to grief because of his greenness. Adam contrived to have Georgie ride the circle with him, and when they were alone he talked.

Bill Hanford remained friendly enough, but he was so absorbed in his own affairs and with his own friends that he had little time to waste on George. In fact it became evident to George that Hanford's sole interest in him was because he was an integral part of a grim joke on Albert Mullins. Another cattleman with whom Georgie became far more friendly was Homer Willis, a man who seemed to personify all the best that George had hoped to find in Western stockmen; courteous, hospitable, and fair minded, Willis was a man in every respect.

Georgie learned a great deal on his rides with Adam Sheets—not only about the technical parts of his new vocation, but of range history and conditions as well. This round-up, he learned, embraced only a small part of the range in which Albert Mullins was interested. Adam himself was "reping" for an outfit thirty miles away, the J K, owned by an Englishman named Jacob Kent.

"Cowboyin' in this country is about done, I reckon," Adam drawled in his soft voice. "I've been at it thirty years an' if they only had an old cowpunchers' home I reckon I'd retire."

"This country can never be farmed," Georgie said.

"Nope. Too high an' frosty."

"And the answer is—sheep?"

"Yep. They been chawin' at our edges fer twenty years, an' now it looks as though old man Mullins was goin' to eat us clean up," Adam answered.

They had been riding where the grass was high and green, but suddenly they found it short and dead looking.

"Sheep, yuh see," Adam pointed out. "They eat it down tuh the roots an' it don't git a chance tuh seed out. In time it don't produce enough tuh feed a canary bird."

"But look here," Georgie objected. "Aren't the sheepmen committing suicide by killing the range out this way?"

"Not the way old Mullins figgers it. His game is tuh git the range in condition that cattle can't live. His sheep can pull through where cattle starve to death. Then he gits a monopoly on the range, protects it a while, an' gradually it comes back. I know range under his control that ain't had a critter on it for two years," Adam explained.

"But why do they stand for it?" Georgie demanded. "My impression was that cowmen went out and killed anybody that opposed 'em."

Adam Sheets laughed. "Killin' ain't as casual out here as yuh've been led tuh believe. Now me, I ain't never killed a man yet. I've had tuh look over the sights a few times, but one or the other of us always backed down."

Georgie decided that there were other men he would rather have peeping over the sights at him than Adam Sheets.

"But there was a killing on the range the other day—two of them," he objected.

Adam gave him a curious look. "That's a fact," he said. "There'll probably be more."

Obviously he did not like to talk about the matter.

"Will they get this Dutch Klepper?" Georgie queried.

"They may," Adam grunted, and on the instant Georgie received a burst of unexpected inspiration. There were men on the range who knew where Dutch Klepper was, and one of them was very likely Adam Sheets. It did not make Georgie think any less of the man.

But though Georgie made these two friends, and there were a few others who treated him well enough, he was not popular. He was promptly given the nickname of "Pug," and he found that his supposed vocation in life was held in contempt by the cowmen, and he was the recipient of constant sneers.

The most loud spoken of his persecutors was a husky young rancher called "Tub" Perry. Tub was given to performing feats of strength such as lifting the wheels of loaded wagons, getting under the bellies of horses and lifting them from their feet, and similar tricks. As Georgie constantly refused to enter into competition, Tub's remarks grew more and more personal and insolent. Tub had a reputation as a fighting man, and he nursed a belief that he could whip the supposed prizefighter.

Georgie realized that a showdown with the bully was inevitable, but he avoided every indirect effort of Tub to force a conflict. And day by day he was getting harder than he had ever dreamed it possible to be. When the soreness went out of his muscles he found that he could stand the hard grind of the round-up as easily as any man there.

He was finding out, also, why the cattlemen did not get together to oppose Albert Mullins. They unitedly hated sheep, but there were old, festering sores between the different outfits; fancied injuries, or petty jealousies. He discovered, for instance, that though Adam Sheets was fairly well liked, no one at this round-up had any use for Adam's employer, unless it was Homer Willis, who had a good word for everybody.

The more he heard of the arrogance of the Mullins outfit, the more he wanted to have a hand in frustrating its ambitious plans.

"At any rate," he told himself, "I won't have a hand in helping the governor put this over."

He was destined to have a hand in the range war sooner than he expected.

It was afternoon and he was hazing a bunch of cattle toward the scene of the afternoon's rodeo while Adam had ridden over a ridge to look for strays, when he saw a man bearing down upon him on a lathering, exhusted horse. The rider, a short, heavily built man, flung himself from his horse as he approached Georgie.

"For Gawd's sake change horses with me," the man requested. "Somebody give me away, an' the posse is just over the hill." He had uncinched his saddle before he got a look at Georgie's face.

"Say, who the hell are you?" he demanded, and his hand suddenly shot to the handle of his gun.

"I'm Adam's friend, Dutch, and you're welcome to my horse," Georgie said promptly, as he stripped his saddle.

"It's a damn good thing you are," Dutch Klepper snapped. "Just the same I'll take that gun o' yours. It'll look better fer yuh when that posse gits here."

A moment later the fugitive had disappeared down a draw while Georgie was rather foolishly putting his saddle on a completely given out horse.

He had no more than finished the operation when a posse of a dozen men or more bore down upon him. At the same time he heaved a sigh of relief as he saw Adam Sheets just topping the ridge.

"Say, what the hell's the idee of helpin' that damn murderer escape?" a big, black moustached person demanded furiously.

Georgie looked the man over with cool disfavor. The fellow was dislikable from hat to boots. The cold, slightly slanted eyes, the short, thick nose, and the thin lips denoted avarice and cruelty.

"You the sheriff?" Georgie asked coolly.

"No, damn you, but I'm the leader of this posse. Which way did he go?"

"I was too busy to notice," Georgie said shortly.

The next moment a quirt descended upon his shoulders with terrific force, and left a red welt across both of them.

With a smothered oath Georgie leaped for the wielder of the quirt and succeeded in catching the black moustached one's arm. The quirt descended again, but Georgie held on and the fellow was jerked from the saddle. The leader of the posse dropped his quirt as they crashed to the ground and tried to draw Georgie down to him. But Georgie set his knee against the man's hip, and then came down with a vicious right handed punch that thudded the fellow's head hard against the ground, and left him cold.

In an instant Georgie found himself the center of a madly milling circle of horses whose riders were doing their best to bend their gun barrels over his head. One of them did graze his cheek, and Georgie caught the fellow's wrist and twisted the gun out of his hand.

At this juncture Adam Sheets drove fiercely into the crowd. "Git back there, yuh damned sheepherders, an' give the man a show," he rasped.

The crowd parted before the onslaught of the puncher, and a man among them, wearing the star of a deputy sheriff, ordered them to stay back.

"Lay off this fellow, boys. It's Klepper we're after," he said.

"But he refused to tell us which way Klepper went, an' he's knocked out Oscar Larsen," a man objected.

"Larsen is too fresh with that quirt of his," the deputy murmured with a sidelong, half fearful glance at the still unconscious man. "Why did you change horses with Klepper?" he demanded suddenly of Georgie.

Georgie slapped his empty holster.

"All right. You punchers are damned easy to get the drop on—sometimes. Now which way did he go?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. You got me all turned around," Georgie grinned. There was little mirth in his smile, for his back was burning and he was seething with inward resentment.

The man Larsen was beginning to rouse himself, and Adam motioned for Georgie to come over by him. The deputy held out his hand for the gun Georgie had captured and Georgie handed it over. Then Larsen crawled onto his horse with a baleful, malignant glance at Georgie, and the posse rode away.

"Who is that slant-eyed, short-nosed gazabo?" Georgie asked.

"Lemme see that back," Adam commanded, and getting off his horse he helped raise Georgie's shirt and inspected the two great red, raw welts. Somehow or other he did not seem displeased.

"We'll have to put some vaseline on that when we git to camp," he said. "An' yuh'll have tuh lay off calf rastlin' fer a while."

"Who was that whip swinger?" Georgie repeated grimly.

"That, muh son, was Oscar Larsen, general foreman for the Mullins Sheep Company—the man that's takin' his orders from old Mullins an' puttin' this range on the hummer. He's a black Dane. There ain't many o' them, I reckon, but when yuh find a mean one he's shore pizen."

If Georgie had not been enlisted in the fight against his father up until that time he was in it with his whole heart now. He had been horsewhipped by a man doing Albert Mullins' bidding.

"He's going to pay for those whip lashes sometime," he said quietly, and he was not referring altogether to Oscar Larsen as Adam Sheets thought.

"Be careful, son. Larsen is bad medicine. A killer is a killer, whether he works with cattle or sheep, an' I reckon there's few people honin' to go up against Larsen," Adam advised.

"I wasn't thinking of Larsen," Georgie said, and left Adam wondering.

CHAPTER VI

The Pugilist Proves Himself

GEORGE and Adam had no more than reached the rodeo grounds than someone noticed George's empty holster.

"Hey, who took yore shootin' iron away from yuh, Pug?" Tub Perry yelled.

"Well, it was a better man than you," Georgie retorted.

"I bet some sheepherder slapped its little

face an' took its gun away from it," Tub sneered. "Lookit the finger-prints on its cheek."

George rode on. Adam had volunteered to furnish a satisfactory alibi for the loss of the gun, but for some reason the lanky puncher withheld it. Adam had become excessively weary of Tub's constant baiting of George, and after what he had seen that afternoon he was willing for Tub to go as far as he liked. A grim smile appeared on his face for a moment as he saw Tub wheel his horse and ride back alongside Georgie.

"It wouldn't have looked so bad havin' 'em just take yore gun away from yuh, but when yuh let 'em slap yore face it looks like all yore talk about bein' a fighter was just bunk," Tub persisted. He reached over and threw his arm across George's back and made an attempt to drag him out of the saddle. He was grinning in an attempt to make it all look playful.

The arm across George's sore back made him wince. He caught the hand and threw it off, and his eyes narrowed. "Look here, Tub, are you looking for trouble, or are you just trying to be funny? Either one is bad business for you, because you're not a bit dangerous and your sense of humor is about as rotten as your manners."

"It is, huh? Well, git off that horse, yuh imitation prizefighter, an' I'll make yuh resemble the sweepin's of a livery stable," Tub invited.

Both men leaped to the ground and kicked off their chaps. George smiled as he noticed Tub's high-heeled boots. He was wearing shoes himself, because Bill Hanford had neglected to furnish him with boots. His ankles had been badly punished by the stirrups, but the shoes gave him all the advantage now.

As George expected, Tub came on with a rush. George side-stepped him easily and made no attempt to fight back. Tub, he knew, possessed the strength of a bear, and was cruel enough to use it. Again and again the husky young ranchman rushed and flailed the vacant atmosphere while Georgie danced away and laughed at him. Tub began to breathe hard.

The sympathies of the crowd, however, were with Tub. "Go on an' fight." "Quit yore dancin'." "'Fraid tuh mix it," were a few of the comments Georgie heard.

George's tactics changed suddenly. Instead of side-stepping, he stepped directly into one of Tub's rushes and sent a hard, straight arm jolt into Tub's somewhat prominent stomach. Tub grunted, and let both hands fall as he doubled over. With a savage delight, Georgie began punching with both hands, his blows landing with the regularity of drum-sticks on a drum. Back reeled Tub before the assault until his high-heels tripped him and he collapsed upon the ground and lay there.

"If you want some more, get up," Georgie invited.

Tub lay still, but his small eyes, which resembled those of a greedy swine, glittered with hate. He had bullied the round-ups for years and this was the first time he had ever been shown up.

"Yo're a professional all right, an' I won't try tuh beat yuh at yore own game, but, by Gawd, there's other ways," he rumbled.

"There is," George Mullins snapped. "And I'll beat you at any one of them you want to try." He knew that he had made a nasty enemy, but somehow it made him rejoice. It occurred to him that he was just beginning to show signs of character. He had gone through life without making either a real friend or an enemy. Recently he had made enemies of Pinky Garfinkle and Muff Munsen, but he could not take any credit to himself for that, because Laura Grant had been primarily responsible. But Tub Perry's enmity was his own achievement.

"If any of yuh birds are curious tuh know what become of Pug's gun, he lost it chasin' a cow through the brush, an' got himself scratched up at the same time," Adam Sheets spoke up.

Later Adam contrived to get four of the leading cattlemen together, and told them the truth of the afternoon's affair. There were Bill Hanford, Homer Willis, Jimmy Johns, and Arnold Smith, the latter a brother to the man who had been killed, and a comparative newcomer on the range.

"The young feller is all right," Homer

Willis declared. "We need men on this range who will show fight, I reckon. I've always been for peace, but unless something is done we'll be run out or go broke."

"Right as hell," Jimmy Johns concurred. "In the old days we wouldn't have stood for old man Mullins fer a minute." He was a little old man with a queer, fuzzy grey beard; with a heart as big as his temper was known to be short.

"We've heard an' read of range wars for years, but did you ever hear of one that the cattlemen really won?" Bill Hanford demanded. "Wherever they've hired gunmen, or fought it out themselves they've generally got hung or landed in the pen, an' the sheep go ahead an' take the range."

"We don't need no killers. If all of you fellers who own cattle inside the range Mullins is tryin' to control would stick together yuh could keep out the sheep," Adam protested.

"Who the hell could stick with that damn high-headed boss of yours?" Hanford retorted heatedly.

"Anybody could, if they'd take the trouble to get acquainted with him," Adam said mildly.

"I know him all I want to," Hanford said.

"An' me," declared Jimmy Johns.

"Well, boys, the thing we've got to agree on is what to do about Dutch," Homer Willis said pacifically. "He can't git out of this country because they'll nab him. Neither can he stick around here unless we help to hide him."

"I'm some interested to know who give him away now," Adam said. "I don't believe anybody would have stumbled onto that cabin where's he's been hidin' unless—"

He left the inference unspoken, but his gaze dwelt for a moment upon Hanford.

"If yuh think fer a minute—" Hanford began hotly, but Adam cut him off mildly.

"I don't think nothin', Bill, except that a dozen of us probably knew where Dutch was, an' it's entirely too many."

"It's all damn foolishness, his hidin' out anyway," Hanford contended. "If he'd give himself up he'd be acquitted on the grounds of self-defense."

"I'm not so sure about that," Homer objected. "Dutch had been drinkin', an' he started in to accuse them fellers of murder. An' the Mullins people do control the courts in this part o' the State."

"I'm going back to the ranch," Arnold Smith said. "Dutch will likely come back there."

"An' that's where Larsen's posse will head," Homer said.

"They'll have a hard time staying there," Smith declared, and the meeting broke up.

Bill Hanford kept pretty much away from the other riders that afternoon. The other men had not quarreled with him exactly, but he felt himself out of harmony with them, and it was no new thing. Ever since Al Mullins had bought a cattle ranch three miles above him and turned it into a sheep ranch, things had been going badly for Hanford. He was more heavily in debt than anyone knew, and in no condition to undertake an expensive fight for range. The Mullins people had put him up in the air as it were by their half threatening, half conciliatory attitude.

They told him they wanted nothing but peace. They did not crowd him as they crowded other cattlemen, but little by little he found the white hordes encroaching upon his range. But he had the sure knowledge that if he resisted they would bring ten herds to eat his grass where now there was only one. They openly suggested that if he would ship his cattle to the Mullins Commission Co. that he would get better than a square deal, and he had found it so. He had to cut down his cattle slightly, but they contrived to always get the top market price for him. But he knew that the other cattlemen would have stood a big loss without a murmur rather than ship to Mullins.

Then he had suddenly become enamoured of Al Mullins' private secretary, and that further identified him with the Mullins interests. Now he believed that some of the cowmen suspected him of double-crossing them and Dutch Klepper. He was innocent of it, but it bred resentment against his neighbors nevertheless. His common sense told him that he would be financially better off if he avoided trouble with Mullins.

Since the recent killings trouble seemed inevitable. He would soon have to make a choice, and he was by no means certain which way to go.

The case of young George Mullins further perplexed him. He had thought it rather a good joke on Al Mullins at first, and he had expected Georgie to quickly wither on the range and make his peace with his father. He was further amused when Georgie had volunteered to work for board and outfit for the privilege of fighting against his father, but Georgie was showing unexpected qualities.

Hanford had no fear that Georgie would get anywhere in the battle he proposed to wage, but he had to consider the effect of his own actions if he decided to make his peace with Mullins. Old Al might bitterly resent his part in the conspiracy. On the other hand, Hanford was a glib talker, and he felt that he might convince old Al he was only trying to make a man of his son. But, being of a vacillating nature, he found it hard to come to any definite decision. But when the other cowmen came around him he acted sullen.

The branding for the day was not quite finished when a boy arrived from the portage where his ranch was located.

"Got some mail for yuh, Bill," said the boy, and handed over several letters, and rode on to distribute letters to other cattlemen.

Hanford glanced over the envelopes hastily, and his eyes widened with surprise as he noted the return address on one of them. He slit the envelope open with a broad thumb nail and his eye sought the signature eagerly. Several cows broke out of the herd where he was supposed to be on guard, but he let someone else chase them back while he read.

"Dear Mr. Hanford: I received your letter just before starting for the West, and have waited to get out here before answering it. This move was most unexpected on my part. Mr. Mullins suddenly announced his intention of coming West and I was given little time to decide about coming.

"I think he has undertaken this trip because he is all broken up because of Georgie's supposed death, though he won't admit it. Anyway, he is in a savage humor, and I pity anyone who opposes him. I think it is our duty to get those two reconciled to each other, but we can't do it too hastily. The first step will have to be taken by Georgie. I wish you would tell him to come in here and have a talk with me—without his father knowing about it, of course.

"Yours truly, Laura Grant."

So Laura was in Pebble. Hanford's first impulse was to ride down there at once and see her. Then he realized that she had not invited him, though she said she wanted to see Georgie. Damn Georgie!

He looked over to where Georgie was at that moment engaged in dodging a calf away from the bunch. He had to admit that there had been a marvelous change in the young city sport in a short time. He did not care greatly about Georgie seeing Laura Grant just yet. He put the letter into his chaps' pocket, and decided that he would have urgent business in Pebble the next day.

CHAPTER VII

A Council of War

LAURA GRANT had discovered on the trip West that her employer had some almost human qualities. Being unable to devote all his time to business, he talked to her. He told her of the hardships and achievements of young manhood, a story that was rather familiar to her. But then he went further and gave her an insight into a childhood that had been made miserable by poverty and brutality. At last the girl began to understand some of the reasons for his ruthless fight for money and power.

It was true that he bragged continually, yet Laura understood that it was but his attempt to justify himself. For the first time the girl heard his side of a story that she had often heard repeated—that Mullins had really married his money.

"I had worked and saved like a slave to get three thousand dollars on hand, when I met my wife," he related. "I was working

on a cattle ranch, but I'd been watching the opportunities in sheep. Then John Turnbow, the wealthy packer, came to the ranch where I was working to spend a two weeks' vacation. I said to myself that there was my chance. It took a lot of courage, but I walked in on him and told him what I could do with sheep if I had a hundred thousand dollars. I talked him into letting me have it because my proposition was iron-clad. I met his daughter there, and afterward I married her."

The millionaire paused as though in retrospection.

"She has been dead a number of years, hasn't she?" Laura hazarded.

"Yes—ten years. Old Turnbow backed me for quite a while; till he died, in fact. I never hit it off with my wife's brothers. When my wife died, they tried to break me. I fought 'em, and won. That was why I went into the commission business. They never expected me to carry the fight into their own territory."

Laura could sense something of the grim financial battle which his remarks implied; for although Albert Mullins was something of a power in the world of livestock, the Turnbows were much bigger figures. It showed, too, that his success had really been won by his own efforts and not by proxy as his enemies contended.

While he was in this mood Laura ventured to ask a personal question which she would not have dared do at any other time.

"How did your wife feel about your struggle with her relatives?"

"She stuck to me. She had money of her own after her father died. They tried to get her to put it in trust for her boys, but she thought I might need it, so she turned it over to me," Mullins said proudly. That an injustice had been done to his two sons did not seem to enter his head.

"But of course you are keeping it separate for your sons," Laura remarked.

He glanced at her keenly. "Edgar is really a partner in the business. George is—is—dead."

"Possibly not," Laura objected. "The body was never found. I'm sure he is alive."

"Nonsense!" Mullins said gruffly.

"I'm sure you are wrong, Mr. Mullins," Laura persisted. "He has probably taken your advice and gone out to make a man of himself."

"It wasn't in him. He was no good," Mullins said loudly, and getting up he walked out to the observation platform, smoking furiously. "All Turnbow," he puffed.

Laura sighed. After all, he was an intolerant, bigoted old man.

Pebble was not up to her expectations, but Albert Mullins clearly showed his satisfaction. "Back to the old stamping ground!" he shouted as his feet touched Idaho earth.

He was met by a half dozen fawning sycophants; mostly business men to whom Mullins gave his custom with a lordly gesture. Laura found herself almost neglected.

A little later she found herself ensconced in the Idanha Hotel. She had a pleasant room, and any anticipations that she might have to endure actual hardships were dissipated.

The next day Mullins conducted her down to the huge white barn, and to her astonishment she found a suite of well-ordered offices on the second story. She was introduced to Clayton Tipper, Albert Mullins' Western manager. He was a man of middle age, sandy complexioned, careful in his speech, and possessed cold, grey eyes that were always calculating. Laura had read many of the fellow's deferential, even obsequious, reports to Albert Mullins, and she surmised that he would exact just such servility from his underlings.

Tipper shook hands with the girl limply. "Mr. Mullins tells me you are going to work here," he said. "I'll have a desk fixed up for you."

"Very well," Laura said without enthusiasm. She was used to privacy in her work, and the prospect here was not alluring. The men proceeded to ignore her, and for the next few days she had little to do.

When she was finally established she found that conditions were not so bad. And as Albert Mullins considered her an important unit in his forces, Clayton Tipper

himself condescended to give her some notice. It was then that she wrote to Bill Hanford.

Laura needed her job, and the elder Mullins' unrelenting attitude toward Georgie caused her to realize that her position would be jeopardized when he found out her part in the deception. It was thus not alone concern for Georgie which caused her to want him to come in. She gave little thought to Hanford.

That same evening Laura was called to take certain notes at a meeting in the big office room in the barn. There were nearly twenty men present besides Albert Mullins and Tipper. Most of them were leading citizens of Pebble, but there was one man in heavy corduroys who was obviously from the range. Laura's cheeks suddenly burned when she found the fellow's eyes upon her appraisingly. A moment later she saw him grinning at her discomfiture. She heard him called Oscar Larsen, and knew that he was Albert Mullins' range foreman; the field general as it were.

Albert Mullins took the floor. "I've called you men together to find out how much support I can count on from you to restore peace on the range," he said challengingly.

"All you want, Al," answered a big, blotchy faced man in a grey business suit. That man was David Walberg, president of the local bank, and the chief power in local political affairs, Laura learned later.

With just one exception the men became almost aggressive in their desire to render Al Mullins any assistance he desired. The solitary exception was a grizzled merchant, Lige Hayes by name.

"What d'ye mean by peace?" this man demanded. It was a simple question, but not easily answered.

"People have interfered with me running my sheep on open range. I mean to show those people they can't use violence to stop me," Mullins replied, and got a cheer from his friends.

"The first man killed was a cattleman," Lige Hayes pointed out. He was drowned out in a chorus of protest till Al Mullins commanded silence.

"Cattlemen have always tried to monopolize the range," he declared. "I worked with cattle myself once, and I know. This man Smith was trying to hold that monopoly when he was killed. That sort of thing is going to be stopped."

"Well, them cattlemen have been good customers of mine for a good many years an' I ain't goin' to throw 'em down," Lige Hayes said angrily.

"Then if you have no sympathy with this meeting, you are not needed here," Al Mullins said icily, and the grizzled merchant arose and lumbered out.

Laura had been well schooled in the philosophy that above everything else she owed loyalty to her employer, but she made mental acknowledgment that she liked Lige Hayes better than anyone else left in the room.

"I intend to make Pebble the greatest livestock center in the West," Al Mullins orated. "You all know what I have already done. By improving the grade of range sheep alone I have brought dollars to this town where you only saw pennies before. The finest range that lays outdoors to-day is out here north of Pebble. Give me your support and a free hand and I'll put hundreds of thousands of pure bred sheep on it. And remember that every lamb that goes to market and every pound of wool will have to be shipped from Pebble. Every bill of supplies for the hundreds of herds will have to be purchased in Pebble."

He paused dramatically, and Laura imagined she could see his auditors licking their lips at the alluring prospect. He went on:

"I can remember the day when it took a dozen good ewes to buy one measly cow. To-day two of my improved ewes will purchase any cow on the range. Is it to the interest of Pebble to encourage cattlemen in their hoggishness?"

The business men of Pebble emphatically let their negative opinion be known.

Al Mullins' face reflected his satisfaction. He needed the support of the influential men of the town far more than they suspected. It was characteristic of him to make sure of his ground before taking any radical steps.

"Then, with your backing, I'm going to

inaugurate a campaign that will make the Pebble range safe for sheep—and sheepmen," he declared. His face was flushed, as it always became when he was in a fighting mood.

"What is the first thing you propose to do?" David Walberg queried.

"I'm going to have that murderer, Dutch Klepper, arested and convicted, and—"

"You arrest him, and I'll see about the conviction," laconically interposed a tall, thin man with a bald head. He was Henry Firth, the county attorney.

Mullins nodded and went on. "And then I'm going to send sheep into the nester country."

It meant nothing to Laura Grant at the time, but his words created a sensation.

"You're going to fight Kent?" Walberg demanded.

"Kent don't look formidable to me," Mullins snapped. "Because he's bluffed those other cattlemen for years don't mean that he can bluff me."

"Have—have you ever tried to buy him out?" a man inquired.

"Many times. Al has offered the fellow all his ranch was worth," David Walberg answered for the sheepman.

"How you goin' about it?" someone asked.

"I'm leaving the details to Oscar Larsen," Mullins said.

The dark range boss grinned evilly. Whoever or whatever Jacob Kent might be, Laura felt sorry for him.

CHAPTER VIII

Sour Grapes

BILL HANFORD rode into Pebble only a few hours after the meeting Al Mullins had called adjourned. He stopped at the Occidental Saloon a few minutes, absently greeting a few friends there, and then put up his horse for the night and went over to the Idanha.

"Somethin's gnawin' on Bill," declared a rancher at the Occidental.

"I reckon it's gnawin' at every cowman in this country," remarked Lige Hayes, still bitter over his ousting from the meeting in the big barn.

Hanford was troubled in his mind, but his resentment was an abnormal thing and directed against the men who had been his friends and neighbors for years.

With some diffidence he asked the hotel clerk if Miss Grant was stopping there, and presently he met the girl in a hotel parlor. She shook hands with him cordially, and his spirits rose. She was even better looking than he remembered her, and he liked her straightforward ways. There was nothing coquettish about this girl, yet neither was she the least bit mannish. She was the kind of a woman he liked.

"You got my note?" she asked.

"Yes; an' I came right in."

"Why didn't you bring Georgie?"

"Well, I was afraid it wasn't safe. The boy is bitter against the old man yet, an' wants to stay dead."

"And the old man is bitter against Georgie, and wants him to stay dead, apparently," Laura said.

"They're a pair of bullheaded fools," Hanford said bluntly. "Why should we bother with them?"

"It isn't right for them to act that way—and my job will be in danger when Mr. Mullins knows the truth," Laura smiled.

"Then I've got an idee," Hanford offered. "We'll both go to the old man an' quietly tell him how it all happened. He'll see we were just actin' for the boy's own good, an' then it will be up to him."

"He'll be furious with all of us. He's in a vicious mood anyhow. Besides, Georgie is entitled to his chance. No; we mustn't tell him yet," Laura contended.

"Is he plannin' on startin' a range fight?" Hanford queried.

The girl considered a moment before answering. Really Mullins had made no secret of his intentions, and she would be betraying no confidences in telling. "I'm afraid he is, Mr. Hanford, and he seems to have the backing of most of the business men of this town."

"Do you know what his plans are?" Hanford asked anxiously.

"No; and I couldn't tell you if I did, as long as I am working for him. But he mentioned a man named Kent." She saw the look of relief on Hanford's face.

"I guess it won't be such a bad thing for the country if he does go after Kent," he said sardonically.

"Why?"

"He's too da—too high-headed altogether with the rest of us, an' for years he's been protectin' a bunch of nesters that had ought to have been run out," Hanford said venomously.

"I guess I don't understand things out here," Laura sighed. "Just how is Georgie coming along anyway?"

"About like yuh'd expect," Hanford said with a dry laugh.

"You think he'll be quitting soon?"

"Probably. He had his head full of idees to break the old gent, but, when he finds out how impossible that is, he won't be able to stand the gaff." Hanford wanted very much to turn the conversation upon himself, but he was finding it difficult to keep the girl from talking about Georgie.

"I wish I could see him," Laura said wistfully.

"If you could come out to the ranch sometime—" Hanford said hopefully.

"I'm afraid I'm too busy," Laura smiled.

Hanford walked about the room nervously. After the hasty declaration he had made just before leaving Chicago he thought the girl should show more personal interest in him, but apparently she had forgotten all about it.

"See here, Miss Grant, I meant what I said about bein' all taken up with you. That young fool of a Mullins has got things in a jam that may cause you trouble, an' if things begin to break bad I want yuh to call on me. Fact is I wish you'd marry me right now so's I could look after yuh."

He choked in embarrassment and his face turned red.

"Why, you amaze me, Mr. Hanford. I—I couldn't think of such a thing," Laura protested.

"But yuh don't mind me comin' here to see yuh once in a while?" he asked eagerly.

"I suppose not. We're both concerned in this Georgie affair for a while, but I won't have you getting sentimental about me."

Bill Hanford was a thin-skinned man, and he felt himself in some way insulted. He made a few more formal remarks and rather stiffly left the room.

Hanford was back on the range by noon the following day, and his gaze rested with a sullen antagonism upon George Mullins. Georgie, by rights, should have developed a yellow streak long before this. Instead, the young fellow had made rapid progress in his work, showed no signs of quitting, and had earned the respect of most of the men.

"Did yuh know your dad was in the country?" Hanford asked half jeeringly as he rode alongside Georgie.

"Yeah, just heard he was," Georgie replied calmly.

"Better be gittin' away from here, hadn't yuh, before he sees yuh?"

"No; I've no intentions of running from him, Bill. If he finds out I'm here, all right. He'll know I'm not working for him."

"And Miss Grant will lose her job as soon as he knows," Hanford said.

"What? Say, Bill, she isn't out here, is she?" George demanded.

"Who said she was? Just the same when your old man finds out how she helped to fool him he'll 'can' her," Hanford said sulkily.

"Well, he'll never know it from me, and if you keep still her job will be safe," Georgie retorted.

"You got her into a hell of a mess just the same," Hanford charged in the same sullen tone. In his heart the cowman had contemplated treachery toward his associates. He believed that he held winning cards in his hands, though he knew that as yet he did not know how to play them. He merely felt that it was going to be to his interest to fight with Al Mullins rather than against him, and this aligned him against young George whose expressed sympathy was with the cattlemen. And he had further cause for grievance against Georgie because of Laura Grant. The girl had been entirely too much concerned with Georgie to suit him.

George was quick to sense the cattleman's changed attitude, though at a loss to account for it.

"Look here, Bill," he said quietly, "I'm

under obligations to you for bringing me out here. I've promised to work for you and I'll do it. But it seems to me at times that you're sorry for your bargain. I can go to work for Jacob Kent, and if you'll let me off I'll do it."

Hanford did some quick thinking. He hated Kent, and he had just learned Al Mullins was going to break lances with the man. With young George working for Kent, something might come of it to his own advantage. And he was sick of George anyhow.

"It's jake with me," he said. "I thought yuh'd soon git tired of workin' for your board."

Georgie flushed, but kept his temper under control. "It was a fool thing to agree to do, but I'll keep my bargain," he offered.

"I won't insist. I was thinkin' of cannin' yuh after the round-up anyway," Hanford said.

"Look here, Bill. You've been talking just a little bit too nasty. If I've done anything to make you sore I'm mighty sorry. On the other hand, if you're simply looking for trouble, I'm not running away from that," Georgie said in a queer, staccato voice.

Hanford remained silent, unable to frame a suitable reply.

"What's eating you anyway, Bill?" Georgie asked in a softened tone.

"Really want to know?" Hanford demanded suddenly. "I'll tell yuh. It's because I believe yuh've been playin' me for a sucker all the time. I think that whole deal in Chicago was a frame-up, an' you're simply out here as a spy for your old man."

The inspiration to make such a charge had come just that moment, and, like many other things he had said and done recently, Hanford could not see where it was going to profit him, but he hoped that somehow it might all turn to his advantage.

Georgie was thunderstruck. He looked at the cattleman in blank amazement; realizing as he did so that denials would be a waste of breath if Hanford was really sincere.

"Well, Bill, I guess it's about time I was looking for another boss if that's the way you feel about it," he said, and rode away.

CHAPTER IX

The Kents

TWO hours after the branding of the last calf in the spring round-up George Mullins and his friend Adam Sheets were on their way. Georgie was riding a horse from Adam's string, but he was still using the saddle that belonged to Bill Hanford. He had offered to leave it and ride bareback, but Hanford had refused.

"Keep it till yuh can git another one, an' then send it back," Hanford had said. He was not small enough to make a man ride bareback.

For the first time in his life Georgie was beginning to appreciate the value of money. The wages of a cowboy, fifty dollars a month, had appeared the same as nothing to him at first because he was used to handling a larger amount than that every day in the most casual manner. Now he perceived that fifty dollars a month would buy a lot of things he needed badly. He still owed Hanford for his fare from Chicago, and for the very clothes he wore. A horse and an outfit to equip it was a necessity. The cattlemen were kind, but he realized that he could not always continue to borrow.

But going to work for wages went against the grain; not only because of the smallness of the amount, but because it tied him up when he wanted to be free to see what he could do against the Mullins sheep herds. For the first time he began to wonder just what he could do to make money himself.

The two friends stopped that night at the Smith ranch. Arnold Smith, who had not been back to the round-up since Georgie's fight with Tub Perry, greeted them warmly, but he was pessimistic over the outlook.

"What become of Dutch?" was almost the first question Adam asked.

"Don't know. I never saw him."

"Hope he got out of the country," Adam said.

"Small chance, I fear," Smith replied. "Wish to God I was out of it."

"Sheep gittin' worse?"

"Yep. Two more herds moved in on us

yesterday—drove from across the river."

"Across the river? I thought—" Adam exclaimed, puzzled.

"Crossed on the Perry brothers' bridge."

"But—but the Perrys wouldn't let sheep across, would they?" Adam objected.

"They did—Los Perry admitted it. Says they've decided to make it a toll bridge."

"Well, I'm damn glad Pug here licked Tub, an' I wish he could git a hold o' Los," Adam exclaimed. He turned to George and explained.

"Yuh see the Smith ranch is located right between Corral Creek, where the round-up finished, and the Dirty Devil River. Their range is right in the triangle between the two streams. Most of it is above the ranch here, but there's a long finger runs down below to where the streams come together. It's at the upper end where Mullins' sheep have been crowdin', but now they're in on this finger because the Perrys, who own a small ranch below the forks on the Dirty Devil, have let 'em cross from the other side where it's all sheep range."

"I don't see any chance except to sell out," said Arnold Smith despondently. "I can't afford to tie my own money up in this, an' Fred's widow, who has moved away, says she can't bear to live here again."

"But, if you sell out this ranch, old Al Mullins has got a key to the whole range up the Dirty Devil," Adam protested.

"Can't help it. I know it puts Kent and those nesters up there up against it, but it's their battle."

"Well, I reckon you're right, Arnold," Adam said gloomily. "Just the same I wish yuh wouldn't sell out to Mullins till I can have a talk with Kent. He might buy yuh out himself."

"I reckon he'll have his hands full, but I'll give him a chance," Smith promised.

"I wish—" George Mullins muttered, and then stopped abruptly as the others looked at him. "I was just thinking," he added apologetically.

If this ranch was the key to the range, and it was for sale, he was thinking, what a chance it would be if he only had the money to buy it. Rather preposterous, he thought, when he even owed for the clothes he was wearing; but he could not dismiss it entirely from his mind.

The middle of the next afternoon the two friends reached the Kent range. Fourteen thousand acres of it, Adam said, and a good chunk of free range besides.

The ranch buildings were built upon a twenty acre shelf of land overlooking the Dirty Devil. At the back of the shelf was a broken lava reef fringed with trees; while surrounding the somewhat pretentious ranch house were a number of well cultivated shade trees. There was a small garden in the back, and the whole place had an attitude of being well kept. Down the river stretched hundreds of acres of growing wild hay, now submerged under a sheet of slowly moving water from canals above.

"The river takes a bend above here, an' in the bend an' beyond is the nesters these other cowmen hate so bad. They'd have run 'em out long ago if it wasn't for Kent's protection. I guess these other fellows, like Hanford, figger they're rustlers, but they ain't," Adam explained.

"I'm curious to meet this boss of yours," Georgie said.

"The privilege is your'n," Adam grinned, as a tall, thin man in a brown suit of clothes, carrying a walking stick, came toward them. Georgie realized that he was gazing at a different type of cattleman from the ones he had known. Kent appeared to be about fifty years of age, and, had it not been for his deeply tanned face, might easily have been mistaken for a man who spent most of his time with books.

"Well, Adam, I see you are back with a whole skin," Kent said pleasantly.

"Yep. Things went off peaceful mostly. Mr. Kent, this is my friend, Pug Lyons. He's a boxer by profession, but he's made good as a rider on this round-up, an' I promised him a job."

Kent turned unusually blue eyes upon Georgie and smiled slightly. "Glad to have you with us, young man. I've been needing a sparring partner for a long time."

Georgie glanced at the speaker with some surprise, unable to tell whether he was joking or not. But this educated Englishman looked as though he might be able to handle himself well for a man of his age.

"I hope I'll qualify, though I'm not such a boxer as the boys try to believe," Georgie answered quietly.

Kent gave him a quick, appraising glance.

"The word is now that old Al Mullins himself has moved out here to make this a sheep country," Adam told his employer.

"So I've heard," Kent said. "What do the other cattlemen think about it?"

"A lot of 'em are ready to throw up their tails an' run. Stayed with Arnold Smith last night. Perrys have turned yeller an' let Mullins cross two herds over the river, an' now they own the promontory," Adam said.

"Rather hard luck for Smith," Kent murmured.

"An' mebbe fer somebody else. He's goin' to sell. I got him to promise to wait till I could see you."

"That was thoughtful of you, Adam, but I have no resources to buy."

"Then—"

"We may have to abandon grazing cattle on the open range and stick to our own land," Kent cut in. "It will come to that eventually, I fancy. We'll have to raise better cattle."

Here, Georgie found, was the one man who did not get excited at the mention of Mullins. With that cool manner of his, he could imagine how the other cattlemen hated him. And what a struggle there would be if Kent ever should lock horns with Albert Mullins.

George and Adam turned their horses loose, and loafed in the shade the remainder of the afternoon.

"Your boss takes it cool enough," George commented.

"He would. Just the same he'll lose a lot of money, but he'll fight like hell first," Adam said. "If these other cowmen had any sense an' would trust him—"

"Yeah, an' who have we here?"

Five men had ridden into the yards, and all of them had been members of the posse that had chased Dutch Klepper. They were again led by the quirt-carrying Oscar Larsen. By his side rode the deputy sheriff. Sighting Adam and Georgie the men rode up to the edge of the shade. Larsen's dark face wore a scowl

"Where's Kent?" he demanded, evidently deciding to omit any reference to the late encounter.

"Haven't seen him lately," Adam said.

"Go over to the house," Larsen ordered the officer.

Five minutes later the man returned with Jacob Kent.

"Your men all officers?" Kent asked.

"No; just members of my posse," the deputy acknowledged.

"Then I'm afraid you'll have to conduct your search alone," Kent said with a cynical grin.

"Say, I come here lookin' for a murderer, an' I'm goin' to search," Larsen said furiously.

"I'm afraid not or I'll have to ask Goudy to arrest you," Kent said. The sweating officer was obviously between the devil and the deep sea. Both men intimidated him.

For a moment Larsen glared into the calm, blue eyes of the ranch owner, then he dropped his hands on his saddle horn. As he looked around he saw not only Adam Sheets and George, but a number of ranch hands in various quarters.

"Goudy could swear us in as officers, but I don't work that way," he rasped. "I know Klepper is here, an' one of these days we'll git him. Come on, Goudy."

The deputy sheriff mounted his horse and they all rode away.

"Is Dutch really here, Mr. Kent?" Adam asked.

"He was. He is up yonder now," Kent smiled, with a lazy gesture toward the distant Buckhorn Mountains.

"I thought he'd come here," Adam said. "But why d'ye reckon they come here to search at this late day?"

"I imagine we shall soon know," Kent said as he walked away.

Later George saw the Englishman reading on the porch as though he had not a care in the world. Presently he saw a girl ride up on a handsome bay thoroughbred. Her riding coat and breeches were of white broadcloth; shiny, high-topped patent leather boots came nearly to the knee; a scarlet scarf loose about her neck gave a splotch of color, and on her head was a pert little black hat.

She threw the reins to a boy who came hurtling from the house, and gracefully dismounted. Jacob Kent was coming leisurely to meet her, and Georgie saw her give his arm a playful squeeze.

"Wowie! We have class at this ranch, don't we?" Georgie breathed. "No wonder Kent isn't popular with his democratic neighbors."

"Yeah, he's an aristocrat by habit, but his heart's right," Adam defended. "Catherine is the same way."

"Daughter?"

"Yeah—widow. Name's Bedford."

That evening Kent appeared for a moment in the bunkhouse. "If you feel up to the mark, Lyons, I'd like to have a go with you in the gym in the morning," he said.

"I'll be there," Georgie promised.

At five the next morning Georgie entered a small but well equipped gymnasium in the basement of the ranch house. He found Kent awaiting him, and close at hand was his daughter.

"Catherine, this is the young boxer I was telling you about," Kent said. "Lyons, I believe, is the name."

"How do you do," Catherine said. She was younger than Georgie had thought, possibly twenty-five, and she was undeniably handsome.

Georgie slipped on the twelve ounce gloves Kent handed him and waited.

"Of course this is only a work-out for you, but it means health for me—unless you hit me too hard," Kent laughed.

"I'll try not to do that, and I imagine you pack quite a healthy wallop yourself," Georgie said.

Kent seemed more anxious to talk than to box, and his daughter chimed in occasionally in a clear, musical voice.

"Ready?" he said at last, and stepped in.

George was content to box on the defensive, and for a few minutes he was rather hard pressed. Kent was a clever boxer, and his punches had sting to them.

"Don't be afraid of hurting me," Kent said, and Georgie suddenly waded in. For a minute the air was full of gloves, but Georgie's youth and stamina were too much for the older man. He fought back valiantly for a while and then surrendered.

"That's enough," he said. "You are very good. If you don't mind we'll have a little work-out every morning."

"It would suit me fine," Georgie said.

"And you can ride with Adam," Kent dismissed him.

"Well, it is he all right," Jacob Kent smiled at his daughter a moment after Georgie had left the gym.

"You are clever, father. I never could have identified him from the picture. He certainly does look like a ranch hand now," Catherine smiled.

"I was struck by his language at once; rather uncommon for a prizefighter, as he claims to be. I remembered at once that Mullins' disappearing son was supposed to be an amateur boxer of considerable repute, so I hunted up the old papers with the boy's picture in them. It needed only this tryout with the gloves this morning to demonstrate that while he is a clever boxer he has never been a professional," Kent explained.

"But what is the idea back of it all?" Catherine wondered.

"It seems obvious enough. Mullins had made up his mind to come out here and fulfill that dream of his to make himself the greatest sheep baron of the world. They framed up this alleged disappearance, and he sent his son out here to act as a spy."

"And what are we going to do about him?" Catherine murmured.

"Have Adam watch him, I presume."

Catherine looked into her father's eyes tensely. "Just how much chance have you of hanging on here, daddy?"

"Not much. Mullins is determined to make us resort to violence. When we do I'm afraid we're finished. The sheep are coming, and there's no way to keep them out except by violence."

"I've heard you say that if you owned Fred Smith's ranch you were pretty sure you could keep the sheep out."

"I was wrong. Fred failed to keep the sheep out down there. Now his brother is going to sell."

"If you could buy it?"

"But I can't."

"With my money—"

"Catherine, I'm not going to use your

money. I may go bankrupt, probably will, but I'll be a sportsman."

"Of course you will, daddy, but we're not going to be beaten by a man like Mullins. And I have an idea—"

"That what?" Kent queried, as she hesitated.

"That I am going to be very friendly with young Mr. Mullins," Catherine smiled.

"Widow's wiles?" her father grinned.

"Why not? We have to fight with every weapon possible, don't we?"

"I can see the humor in the situation—and it might not be such bad tactics. But, look here; he is really a fine looking chap—you won't fall in love with him, will you?"

"I'm through with that," Catherine said, and for a moment there was a hard look on her pretty face.

Later Kent appeared at the bunkhouse. "I'd like to see you privately, Adam," he said. "And, Lyons, my daughter wishes to see you. She has taken a fancy to showing you over our ranch herself, and around here she always gets what she wants."

"I—I'm highly honored," Georgie flushed as the other men in the bunkhouse grinned.

What could the handsome Catherine want with him, he was wondering?

(*To be continued in the next issue.*)

TIMBER TROUBLE

THE American forest problem is the problem of putting and keeping at work some 470,000,000 acres of once, if not now, timbered land that is not being used economically in some other and better way than the production of wood. It is also the problem of maintaining the high living standards of the American people, which are partly due to the lavish use of wood in housing and as raw material for industries that support one-tenth of our population.

It is difficult to grasp the significance of 470,000,000 acres, but it is almost one-quarter of the land area of continental United States, exclusive of Alaska, and three times as large as the whole of France. Considered as absolutely idle, this wooded country reduces the economic area of the nation by about 25 per cent. It is not actually idle, but it is so much of a loafer that some authorities figure that it is in effect three-fourths idle, considering it as a whole. Some tracts of timber land are working overtime in the production of wood; others are working just enough, because of the old age of their forests, to replace the annual depletion of death and decay; some are working the equivalent of half time, and about a fifth have become deserts, so far as the production of trees of commercial value is concerned. It is calculated that this utterly non-productive classification amounts to more than 80,000,000 acres—all covered formerly with dense growths of useful woods. The area of mature forests which have, as one might say, retired from active work in their old age, is 135,000,000 acres.

Every year between four million and five million freight cars loaded with forest products pass between shipping and receiving points through hundreds of millions of acres of vacant and unproductive land that might be growing timber. To continue to leave one-quarter of our land area unproductive of its natural crop of timber is to seriously impair the economic independence of the nation.

Already Canada is producing more newsprint paper than the United States and about 85 per cent of the Canadian product is bought by American publishers. If Canada were to put an embargo on paper, pulp and pulpwood tomorrow, it would create a panic in the American publishing industry. Thousands of newspapers might be forced to suspend publication. And yet there are within the limits of the United States and now available enormous quantities of pulpwood and vast areas of land that might be producing it. Not only that, but it is calculated that the incidental wood waste of the lumber industry for which no profitable market now exists is sufficient to supply material for all our present paper requirements. But there is little or no integration of paper making with lumber making, and for the most part the existing paper mills are where the pulpwood forests used to be, but not where they are located at present.

So much for the facts of the American forest problem. What is being done to solve it? The answer requires a statement of the ownership of the remaining forest land of the country. We are not concerned, of course, with the 350 million acres of land that have been forever cleared in order to make room for farms, cities, roads and golf links. In the first place, the Federal government owns within the limits of the 150 national forests about ninety million acres of actually wooded land although the total area of the national forests, including Alaska, is about 160 million acres. The state and local governments own about ten million acres of woodland; the farmers, about 150 million acres in the form of woodlots; the commercial timber companies—lumber, pulp and paper, naval stores, etc.—about 220 million acres.

Pictures for Punchers

By Marie de Nervaud

Taking a spill in the dust before a motion-picture camera is no delight for a cowboy. But when he's thrown at the feet of a girl like Helen, a fall has compensations.

I

BUCK HARRIS, riding at a slow pace over the dusty road which led from the Bar 3 Ranch, was in low spirits. Sitting at ease in his saddle, he gazed mournfully at the tawny landscape, bathed in the afternoon sunlight. His broad Stetson pulled low on his forehead threw into deep shadow the brown cheek and the keen gray eyes. His paint pony, usually as high-stepping and carefree as Buck himself, sensed his master's mood, and loitered accordingly.

Buck belonged to the outfit of one of the few of the old time ranches that were left in Wyoming. The Circle X had stubbornly resisted the march of civilization, and, owing to its large holdings, had more or less kept its boundaries intact. Old Man Barney had old-fashioned ideas as to the standards his punchers should measure up to, and to be a member of his outfit stamped a man as a live wire.

Just now, Buck was on his way home, after turning over a string of ponies to the Bar 3, one of the old time outfits that had fallen to the low estate, from a cowboy's point of view, of "dude" ranch. Turning in his saddle, he looked back at the ranch house, now a mere speck in the distance. The shiny new roofs of the log cabins that had been put up to furnish extra accommodations for the dudes, gleamed in brazen contrast to the weather-beaten older buildings.

"Hell's bells, Zeeb, this whole country 's goin' to the dogs!" confided Buck to his mount, whose markings had earned him the name of Zebra. "Think of the head of cattle they could 'a' got for the price of them doll houses! Then they could 'a' had some man-sized jobs for that gang of fancy dress cowboys. That's what gits me!" Zeeb twitched an ear in sympathy. "It's corruptin' the whole profession of punchin'! Makes me plumb disgusted to see that bunch of grinnin' hyenas dressed up in their chaps, waitin' to ride herd on a flock o' dames that never saw a hoss before!"

They were nearing a bend in the road, and Buck was swung 'round in the saddle, feet hanging free, as he gazed back. As Zeeb ambled round the bluff, an apparition in black, and a sudden grinding noise, made him tighten his muscles and brace

his feet in terror. Then, before Buck could recover his balance, Zeeb careened wildly off the trial, swung round and headed for the open country, minus a rider. Utterly bewildered, Buck found himself sitting in the dust, gazing after his vanishing mount.

"Well, I'll be—" before he could tell what he'd be, he heard a tremulous voice say, "Auntie! You shouldn't have done that!" Then, just behind him, "I hope you're not hurt?"

A girl had detached herself from the black mystery that had stampeded Zeeb, and was coming toward him. Under the brim of her hat, Buck was aware of blue eyes that danced with merriment, though she was trying hard not to laugh. The full red lips were puckered in an effort to express fitting concern for his plight.

Buck was on his feet, pride and chagrin overcoming his bewilderment. "What in — I mean, what happened?"

He glanced up at the bank. A tall gaunt figure, dressed in a black riding habit, stood by a strange looking black instrument, set on a tripod. She was busily turning a crank, making a rasping sound, which Buck recognized as the grinding he had heard just before Zebra dusted him.

The girl stepped quickly over, and put a determined hand on the crank.

"How could you go right on?" Buck noticed how pretty she was, as the color flooded her cheeks, and her eyes flashed. "After all, he might have been hurt!"

"Wal"—the older woman had a nasal drawl that was unfamiliar to Buck, "soon's I found he warn't hurt, I calculated I might as well go on, and git the rest of the moving picture."

"Picture!" This word galvanized Buck to action. He strode over angrily, "You mean to tell me—"

"Please!" A hand was on his arm, and the girl was looking up at him, her eyes pleading, though amusement still lurked at the corners of her mouth. "Let me explain. My aunt doesn't know the West, and she didn't understand—"

"There now!" Auntie broke in. "No sense in eatin' any more humble pie. This is a public way, and I guess I got a right to take a picture if I've a mind to. Too bad you lost your horse, young man, but you oughtn't to let him shy so easy."

"Auntie! You must stop!" The girl turned to Buck. "Please forgive us for all the trouble we've put you to!"

"That's all right, miss."

Buck's voice was grim. He'd never been in a mess like this before, and his one idea was to get away. "No harm done." He awkwardly shook the hand she held out to him, and stalked down the road.

Auntie's voice floated after him. "Nonsense, Helen! How could I know the first cowboy I saw would fall off his horse?"

Buck's hands clenched, and red lights danced before his eyes. It would have gone hard with anyone who had offered him an excuse for a fight just then. "Old she-cat," he muttered, rage setting his pace at about five miles an hour.

After a few miles at this rate, Buck's high-heeled boots brought their owner to sober second thought. The high heels might be all right to dig into the ground when roping on foot, but they were not made for walking. Anyway, walking was not Buck's favorite form of exercise, and the stiff boots were beginning to chafe and rub.

Slackening his pace, Buck's rage against the "old she-cat" gradually gave way to his sense of humor. Some figure he must have cut! The girl was all right, even if she had laughed at him. Pretty as a picture and plenty of spunk. He liked Helen for a name; he'd like to meet her again. He wished she'd seen him win his prizes at the last rodeo! She'd know then whether or not he could ride.

Memories of Auntie's last remark cut in on these pleasant thoughts, and Buck's sense of humor almost went under. Fall off! Hell! He'd never seen anything like that specimen of female before. Just showed the kind of material these dude invoices were apt to bring. How'd she ever come to have a niece like Helen?

The rattling of the wheels of a buckboard broke in on Buck's reverie, and he looked around hopefully for a lift.

"Hello there!" It was Old Man Barney,

who pulled up in surprise at the sight of Buck afoot. "Walkin' for your health?"

Buck had a shame-faced grin as he climbed in beside him. His mind was searching desperately for a plausible excuse. He wasn't going to tell of his mishap, but it wasn't so easy to fool the Old Man.

"I seen some queer lookin' tracks back there," he began slowly, "so I follows 'em a ways off the road, and leaves Zeeb all peaceable. But somethin' must 'a' happened to scare him bad, 'cause when I gits back, there goes the son-of-a-gun, chasin' off hell-bent for the state line. Nothin' to do but hoof it."

Old Man Barney shot a keen glance at Buck. His mouth twitched slightly under his grizzled moustache, as he answered. "Find out what the tracks were?"

"No, sir." Buck felt he hadn't done any too well, and was anxious to get off the subject. "Zeeb'll be back all right, when he gits over his scare."

"Yeah—he's all right. Not worryin' 'bout him. But I don't like the idea of strange animals prowlin' round. 'Tain't safe, all those dudes on the place. Perhaps we'd better go back, and follow up those tracks."

"Naw—'tain't necessary." Buck looked up quickly; was the Old Man stringing him? "They was tracks of some small animal. I was jest curious." Again he made a stab at a change of subject. "How'd yuh like the 'improvements' at Bar 3?"

"Well—every man to his own likin'." The Old Man had long left behind him the intolerance of Buck's twenty-five years. "Right neat little cabins. Had lunch with some of the folks over there."

Buck was elaborately indifferent. "Many of 'em arrived yet?"

"'Bout six. One old maid from up Maine way did most of the talkin'. She's got a movin' picture camera; wants to git pictures of the life out West and give lectures with 'em at church sociables, and what all, back East."

Buck could feel the red creep up and reach even to the back of his ears. Movin' pictures! He'd been so absorbed thinking of the girl, and the figure he'd cut that he hadn't taken in that that was a movie camera. Hell's bells, she had the whole thing! Him being dusted and the girl talking to him.

"Easy there! Want to upset us?" Old Man Barney glanced curiously at Buck's flaming face, as he half rose from his seat. "What's wrong?"

"Nothin'!" muttered Buck, settling back. "Heels a mite blistered from walkin'. Jest hit one of 'em."

"Must be mighty sensitive. Look here, Buck; got anything on your mind?"

"Naw—not a thing." Buck stubbornly refused confidences.

Old Man Barney shrugged his shoulders, and the rest of the ride was taken in silence. Buck's thoughts were running riot. He'd just got to get that picture. He'd have to see the girl; ask her to help him get it. Suppose the old cat took a notion to show them out here? His face flamed again at the thought.

As they topped the last rise leading to the ranch house they saw Zebra patiently standing by the corral. With a hasty "thanks," Buck dropped off, and went after him, stripping off the saddle with none too gentle hands, and turning him loose in the corral. Then he ducked away to have a chance to get his story in better shape, before he met the rest of the bunch, who were lounging on the bunkhouse steps, waiting for supper.

Buck's plan to slip in unnoticed after the others had started eating hardly had the success he hoped for. Shorty, the prize humorist of the outfit, was on the look-out for him.

"Givin' Zeeb a rest this afternoon?" he began innocently.

Buck grunted, and fell to at his supper.

"Thought yuh might have made off with one of the dudes and was sendin' Zeeb back with a message, like a carrier pigeon. What's the big idee of the promenade? Any Mad'moiseles round?" Shorty's A. E. F. vernacular still clung to him.

"Buck left Zeeb while he went to follow some strange tracks," explained the Old Man. "He's takin' to scientific investigation."

A burst of loud guffaws greeted this.

Shorty went over to the big fireplace and, taking out a dusty pop corn shaker, solemnly handed it to Buck.

"Perhaps you'll be wantin' to chase butterflies next," he explained, as Buck glared at him.

"Aw—cut it out!" Buck's usual good nature blew up under the double strain of the kidding and the worry of how he was going to get hold of that picture. He pushed back his chair. "You guys think you're too damned funny," he growled, as he made for the door.

Shorty gave a long whistle.

"Some dame in it," he remarked, sagely.

II

FOR the next few days, Buck's riding seemed to always take him in the direction of the Bar 3. He'd be combing the draws on the north boundary, then by hard riding, he could circle round, and come back by the way of the dude ranch.

For three days, now, he'd passsed it without nerving himself to the point of going in.

"How kin I go prancin' in there, and ask for 'Helen'?" he questioned Zebra. Zeeb turned a sarcastic eye on him, but offered no solution of the problem.

"I'll do somethin' to-morrow," Buck promised himself, starting Zeeb into a brisk cow trot. It was about five miles further, going home the round about way, but he wasn't going to give Shorty any lead on where he'd come from.

A pounding of hoofs brought Buck to the alert. Rounding the curve, and coming toward them, a bay mare was running wild, completely out of control of the slight figure in the saddle. In an instant, Buck had whirled Zebra round, and, as the mare passed, he caught the bridle, and racing alongside, pulled her to a panting halt.

The girl, who had showed remarkable nerve and horsemanship, turned to thank Buck, presenting to his amazed eyes the flushed face of the "Helen" he had been hoping to meet.

Recognizing him, she smiled gamely, though her hand trembled, and her voice was shaky as she thanked him.

"This is mighty nice of you to come to the rescue," she said. "I don't know what started my mare off, but I couldn't stop her."

"Yuh did well to keep your seat," answered Buck. "Didn't know"—he started to say "dudes," but changed it—"Easterners could ride that well."

"East? I'm not from the East. My dad has a ranch over in Montana."

"Yuh don't say!" The relief in Buck's tone was comic. "But your aunt, now—?"

"Oh yes—Auntie." Helen laughed and Buck joined her, as he saw she was remembering their last meeting. "She's from Maine. She invited me to spend a month with her." She sighed.

"Jest gettin' off for a breathin' spell?" inquired Buck sympathetically.

Helen nodded. "She's always asking questions. Between that and taking pictures, she's getting every one riled."

"Say"—the horses were walking slowly, side by side along the trail—"do yuh s'pose yuh could git that picture she took of me?"

Helen shook her head. "She keeps them all locked up; and besides, I wouldn't know which film it was."

"Perhaps we could figger out some way to get it. You might be takin' a ride this same time to-morrow afternoon?"

"Why yes—I might be." She pulled up her mount, and held out her hand. "I must be getting along now."

"Well, good-bye. See yuh to-morrow."

Buck turned, and started a second time for home. "Some girl," he confided to Zeeb. "Bet between us we find some way to get the picture out of the old lady."

Swinging off in an easy lope, he gave vent to his relieved feelings by lustily singing one of his favorite cowboy songs.

"Dan Taylor is a rollicking cuss,
A frisky son-of-a-gun,
He loves to court the maidens,
And he savvies how it's done.

"He used to be a cowboy,
They say he wasn't slow,
He could ride the bucking bronco,
And swing the long lasso."

When he came to the last verse, his voice

dropped to a rumbling, sentimental bass.

"He will leave off riding broncos,
And be a different man.
He will do his best to please his wife,
In every way he can."

III

IT evidently took a great deal of planning to get the picture. Night after night, Buck turned up late for supper, until the cook threatened not to give him any.

Shorty had not failed to notice Buck's cheerfulness, but he could get no satisfaction for his curiosity.

"He's up to some game," he told the bunch, after Buck had wandered off by himself. "We been on the north range together, and he does enough hard ridin' for two men, up to four o'clock; then, all of a sudden, he vamooses. While I ain't complainin' none about Buck's not doin' his share, it sure is queer not to see hide or hair of him in the late afternoons. I'm goin' to trail him to-morrow."

The next evening as the outfit was lazily waiting for the supper call, there was a drumming of hoof-beats on the road, and Shorty whirled up in a cloud of dust, swung to the corral, and in the twinkling of an eye, had slipped off the saddle, and turned his lathering mount loose.

He came over wiping his forehead with his sleeve. "I got some news," he called, his red face beaming with mischief.

They all gathered round. "We've got to dope this out quick," said Shorty, "before Buck gets back. He's not to know I've been ridin' herd on him. Golly!" he slapped his thigh, and laughed. "The fresh son-of-a-gun!"

"Come on then—spill it."

"Didn't I tell yuh all it was a dame? I seen the two of 'em, ridin' along slow as a funeral, Buck leanin' over mighty protecting like. I follows at a distance, and pretty soon they dismounts and sets down on them rocks by the bluff. Buck has his arm round her; he ain't been wastin' time, that's one sure thing. I thinks it 'd be a good joke to catch a sentence or two, and spring it as a surprise for Buck. So I creeps round behind 'em, and this is what I hears."

Shorty exploded again, much to the impatience of his hearers.

"Couldn't jest catch on at first. 'Pears the girl's got an aunt at the Bar 3 that's hell-bent on gettin' pictures of cowboys. She got one of Buck that he's some anxious to get back, but she won't yield it up 'less he gits her some more like it, in its place. 'Why don't yuh get some of your outfit to ride over, and let her take 'em?' asks the girl. 'They wouldn't come,' says Buck, gloomy-like."

"The bird's got some sense left, anyhow," drawled one of the punchers.

"'She's plannin' to give a show here, before she leaves,' says the girl. Yuh ought to have seen Buck's face! First time I ever seen him look scared. 'Somethin's got to be done,' he mutters. 'I got it,' he says. 'I'll get some of the bunch over here somehow; won't tell 'em what I want 'em for. Yuh get your aunt all set with her camera, 'round this bluff, and I'll get the boys to look round at something, and be off guard. When their ponies rounds the curve, and sees and hears the bloomin' machine, they'll act same as Zeeb did!'"

"'Buck, you're wonderful!' she says, and from the looks of the two of 'em, I senses it's time for me to vamoose. I backs out and beats it home to put yuh all wise."

"What's your idea?" a voice inquired.

"I don't know just what he meant, by 'act same as Zeeb did.' He may of dusted him, or something, though it ain't likely. Anyhow, this is how I sees it: we'll fall for goin' with him. I ain't got no objections to doin' some fancy ridin' front of a pretty girl. He seems to be figurin' out that somethin'll happen to make us get dusted, too. We'll just sit tight, and show that girl what ridin' is. It'll be a hell of a joke on Buck."

To Buck's surprise, three of the boys fell in readily with his suggestion to have a look at the dude ranch the next Sunday.

A second surprise awaited him as they all met at the appointed time. The boys were spruced up to beat the band. All three had on their chaps, and the handkerchiefs knotted round their necks were new ones, while Shorty had added his

silver filagree hat band as a final touch.

"Gee! Pipe the style! What's the big idea?" asked Buck.

"Givin' the dudes a treat."

Without further comment, they fell into line, and headed out over the mesa at a brisk cow trot.

"Yuh know any of the dudes, Buck?" Shorty asked suddenly.

"I seen one or two of 'em in the distance, once or twice." Buck's tone was indifferent and bored sounding.

"That's interestin'," commented Shorty. "Jest what would yuh call a 'distance,' now?" He winked at one of the other boys.

Buck missed the wink, but something in Shorty's tone made him stir uneasily. "I ain't got no use for dudes," he declared.

"Sure yuh ain't," soothed Shorty. "How about dudesses, though?"

"Think you're funny, don't yuh?"

Buck knew this fell short of his usual line of repartee, but he was getting worried. They were nearing the place where Helen and her aunt were stationed, and unless he could get the boys off their balance and half out of their saddles the way he had been, they'd never get spilled.

He pulled Zebra to a walk, and dropped to the rear. The others slowed up, and for a space, men and horses drowsed along through the afternoon sunlight.

Suddenly Buck looked behind him, and uttered a loud exclamation. "By gum, look at the clouds comin' up. Bet we get a storm before long."

"Yeah; likely." None of them looked around.

This was getting desperate. Buck could see the bluff looming up ahead, and he knew that Helen was just waiting 'round the other side to give her aunt the signal to start up the machine.

"Who's the guy comin' behind us?" he asked anxiously.

"Don't know." The three cowboys settled firmly in their saddles, warily on the lookout for a surprise.

Shorty was in the lead, and, as he rounded the turn, the grinding crackling noise cut through the afternoon stillness. After one taut second, his sorrel haired horse reared and plunged, jumped clear of the trail, and started to bolt. Shorty had his hands full, but he managed to hold him in and get out of earshot of the machine, where he brought his trembling mount to a halt and looked back to see how the others fared.

One by one, they passed the ordeal, then all waited as Buck came charging after them. His expression of chagrin made it hard for the boys to keep their faces straight, but they all played up to Shorty's lead.

"What the hell—" he paused and looked back at the black apparition just off the trail. "Let's go see whose funeral it is," he suggested cheerfully. "Seems like they got a female funeral director," he added, catching sight of Helen's aunt.

In spite of himself, Buck snickered at this description of his particular "bete noir," who was standing in the road, her ridiculous black riding habit held up in one hand, while she shaded her eyes with the other, as she gazed after them.

"It's jest one of their fool dude contraptions," he said gruffly. "Let's get a move on."

"Now, I don't see it that way," Shorty was gently argumentative. "We come to see dudes, and there they is. My notion is, why not go up now, and say 'Howdy'?"

"Sure," agreed the other boys, and, in spite of Buck's protests, they headed back.

Buck was in a quandary. If there was one person he didn't want to meet, it was Helen's aunt. And he wasn't any too anxious to have Helen meet the other boys. Not until he'd succeeded in making her say "yes" to a certain question he'd been asking with increasing persistence. He might have known better than to plan anything with Shorty in it and expect it to turn out right. Trust Shorty to ball things up. Nothing to do now but make the best of it.

He wheeled about, and caught up with the boys.

"Seems like I have met that girl somewheres, come to think of it," he muttered hurriedly. "I'll introduce yuh if you're so hell-bent on it."

"Well of all the coyotes!" Shorty gave

Buck a dig in the ribs. "Now you're talkin'!"

As they drew near, their mounts began to sidestep the strange looking machine, but with the terror of the noise removed, they allowed themselves to be urged closer.

Buck performed the introductions, then fell somewhat gloomily in the background, leaving Shorty as master of ceremonies. "He'd have to be the whole show, anyway," he told himself savagely, watching Shorty make up to Auntie, otherwise known as Miss Manson.

"Yuh don't say!" Shorty was saying admiringly, as Miss Manson told him about her pet hobby. "Yuh mean yuh got a picture of us ridin' past jest now? I'd sure like to see it."

"That can be easily arranged," said Miss Manson briskly. "I'm having a little exhibition next Saturday night. I'd be glad to have you all come. I've got some real good pictures; funny ones, too."

Buck's heart gave a suden flop, then went right down into his boots. His doom was sealed; he'd never have a moment's peace on the range if she showed that picture. He speculated on the chances of coming right out and asking her for it. He studied her as he might study a horse he was about to buy. "No go," he decided. "She's got a mean eye, and a stubborn mouth."

A soft voice broke in on his thoughts, and he looked down to see Helen standing beside him. "Don't you worry, Buck. I'll do something about it for you." Her eyes were full of sympathy, and something besides, far more precious, but Buck didn't dare see it. She'd never looked more loveable to him, but what was the use? He couldn't ask her to marry a joke. And that's what he'd be; the prize joke of Butte Center. He'd just have to light out, and—

"We got to be movin' along," he heard Shorty say.

"You'll come over to-morrow?" Helen asked, as he mechanically picked up the reins.

He nodded; yes, he'd do that. Come over and say good-bye. She smiled up at him as Zebra moved off, but Buck's answering smile had more misery than joy in it.

IV

IT was Saturday night, and as Buck rode over with the outfit to the Bar 3 for Miss Manson's movie show, his feelings were decidedly mixed.

He'd had a change of heart about "lighting out," after he'd seen Helen last Monday. First place, she was altogether too dear to him for him to face the chance of losing her. And, in the second place, she had promised him that she could keep the picture from being shown. She wouldn't tell him her plan, but she at least half convinced him that she could do it.

This calmed Buck down somewhat, and made him abandon the wild schemes he'd been turning over in his mind, which went so far as to include plans to set fire to the cabin when Helen and her aunt were out, or to kidnap Auntie.

"I sure am plumb gone over that girl, Zeeb," he confided. "I'd 'a' bet anyone this whole ranch to a mangey coyote skin, that nothin' would 'a' made me go to this show to-night. And now look at me! Jest because Helen was so set on my comin', I promises meek as a lamb." Here Zebra gave a sideway jump, as though testing out that meekness, but Buck tightened the reins with a grip of iron. "Cut out the shyin', yuh son of Satan! If it hadn't been for yuh, I wouldn't be in this mess."

The Bar 3 presented a scene of great activity. The big dining-room had been turned into a lecture hall, with a sheet suspended at one end, and the operator's box for the movie machine at the other.

Miss Manson was flying around giving orders right and left, and calling Helen every minute. In spite of this, Helen found time to show Buck to the seat she had saved for him at the end of the hall. "I'll have to be near the operator's box," she explained. She was flushed, and several tiny lines of worry puckered her forehead, but she smiled brightly up at Buck and nodded, "It's all fixed."

"Wait a sec," Buck detained her. "Who's runnin' the machine?"

"Sim Jackson," she answered, and slipped away before he could ask any more questions.

Buck's look darkened. He didn't hold much stock by that Sim Jackson. Trust Auntie to pick the worst one of the bunch to run her show for her.

The lights went out, and he settled back, waiting for the pictures to begin. Smart kid, Helen was. He'd fallen down on getting a substitute picture, but she'd found a way to fix things up. He idly wondered how she'd got hold of the film.

Suddenly, through his abstraction, whispered voices came to his ears from behind the operator's box.

"You're sure you understand," Helen's voice was saying. "I can't tell the films apart this way, but I'll know which one it is the minute you start it. Then I'll tap on the door, and you throw off the light and pretend something's the matter with the machine, and slip that film out to me."

"Sure, I got yuh," a husky voice whispered back, "but yuh'll have to stay in there with me. I might not hear yuh, when yuh knocked on the door."

"Oh—I couldn't do that," Helen's voice sounded uneasy. "There isn't room for two in there."

"Plenty of room, girlie. Now I think of it, guess I'll collect in advance."

"Why—what do you mean? You said you'd help me out—"

"Sure, I did, but I ain't givin' my services for nothin'. A kiss or two—"

He got no further in his bargaining. Buck's chair crashed to the floor as he flung himself round the booth, and grabbing the amazed Sim by the collar, hauled him out of the room to the good solid earth outside. Here was action at last, and he plunged joyously into the business of making it clear to Sim that bargains of that description were decidedly unhealthy.

After the first surprise, Sim tried to put up a defense, but he was no match for Buck's furious onslaught.

"Reckon that's punishment enough," gasped Buck, and Sim evidently agreed with him, for he slunk away, muttering threats. Buck strode back to the room, where someone had at last managed to turn on the lights, and the uproar was subsiding.

Auntie's wrathful figure confronted him at the door, but Helen pushed past her, and grabbed Buck's arm. "You're not hurt are you? Please say you're all right!" she begged.

"Helen, what does this mean?" Auntie's voice rasped out.

"It means Buck and I are engaged," Helen answered in a low voice, flushing deep crimson, but holding herself proudly.

The grim expression on Auntie's face softened, as she caught the look that passed between Buck and Helen.

"So, that's why you were so anxious to get that film! Wal, now, it's right over at the cabin. I wasn't goin' to use it anyhow." She looked at Buck and a twinkle came in her eye. "You spoiled that film for me by falling off. I'll give it to Helen for one of her wedding presents."

"That's right, ma'am." This from Shorty, who had joined the group, and overheard the last two sentences. "She may find it handy, if this here Buck gets to boastin' any time!" He grinned at Buck and gave him a friendly dig in the ribs, as he gazed admiringly at Helen. "He sure always does land on his feet," he commented.

"Except once," countered Auntie dryly. "Reckon we might as well drop the love interest, and git on with the pictures." She turned to Buck. "Seein' as how you felt called on to remove my operator, young man, you might try running the show yourself."

"I'll help him," volunteered Helen. "There's plenty of room in the booth for two."

"Sure," agreed Buck happily. "All dependin' on the two."

"All dependin' on how promptly the pictures show up," amended Auntie. "We'll give you a try out."

Flushing again at the general laugh, Helen stepped in the booth, followed by Buck, and at Auntie's brisk, "Light's out" the audience settled back, ready for the show to begin.

Sally Ann's Shoppie

By
Isabelle M. Horn

There was a landslide of hats on the Skyline Ranch. Big hats and little hats, flowered and plain, hats no cowboy could have the least use for. Yet — well, it was Sally Ann who made them, and Sally Ann who sold them, and what hombre wouldn't corral all the hats in La Mesa for Sally Ann's smile?

THE hot afternoon sun was suddenly blotted from the low doorway, there was a creaking of loose floorboards responding to a heavy tread, and Sally Ann came forward half-eagerly, half-timidly, to greet a customer —the first one that day.

"Something I can show you in hats?" She hoped the "customer"—oh, surely he must be a customer—would not detect the trembling anxiety in her voice.

"Yes, ma'am—that is, I—I guess so." The tall stranger grinned down at her bashfully, his bronzed face tinging to red.

"Oh, you want to get a hat for your wife? A surprise, maybe?" Sally Ann smiled brightly. "Something sweet and pretty—like this?" She flew to a shining, speckless case and pulled out a creation that to Dick Warner's bewildered, masculine eyes looked like nothing so much as one of those frothy desserts that the hotel at Reno served for Sunday dinner.

He played with his wide leather sombrero nervously, and backed slightly away from eager little Sally Ann and the "creation," as if half afraid she would insist that the bit of daintiness be transferred to his unwilling hands.

"No'm, ain't lucky enough—I mean 'tain't a wife I'm wanting a hat for, it's another reason, or, that is," he was plainly confused, "somebody out to the ranch. I kinda thought maybe I'd get something for 'em. I been sitting across the street at the hotel and noticing you weren't busy just now, so I been thinking maybe it's a good time to get fixed up. You don't carry no men's hats now, do you?" he ended hopefully.

"Only for ladies, and I've made them all myself!" Then, wistfully, "No, I'm not so busy right now, I—I haven't been yet, but I'm sure I will be after I'm a

little better known. Don't you think so?"

"Sure, you bet!" Dick answered hastily, emphatically. "'Course they ain't such a powerful lot of women in La Mesa, not more'n twenty I suppose, countin' Indians and Mexicans. But there's the outlying ranches got quite a lot of women, considerin'. Anyway, they gotta have hats, might just as well come here as go all the way into Reno—"

"*There!* That's my idea exactly!" exclaimed Sally Ann triumphantly, bobbing her head until every curl danced. "When I found Uncle Jim Kelly had left this little house to me, I came right up from Berkeley with this in mind. I cleaned and painted for days, getting ready, then I worked and worked making the hats. You see, I brought just a big trunk load of stuff with me, so it didn't cost much to get started. And now—now, soon's I'm established, you *do* think business will pick up, don't you, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Warner, ma'am, Dick Warner. And it sure will, all right! Business 'round this partickler little shop is just naturally goin' to pick up like it's been lifted with a stick o' dynamite. I'm here to tell you that the market for hats is due for a rise. Now, as I was saying, over there at the hotel I've been a wonderin' why business is slack in a pretty little shop like this, an' I figgered out it's 'cause nobody knows you're here—see?"

"But—but everybody in La Mesa knows it. Some of them have been in—the ladies, I mean. Miss Tillie Forsythe is wearing one of my hats already, though she hasn't paid me for it yet."

"You'd better deduct that from your income tax already—Tillie's an old hand at gittin' credit on her face."

"Then Mrs. Smoot is going to have a new hat on pay-day, if Joe brings his money home all right—"

"Another maverick," muttered Dick, his initial bashfulness now thoroughly overcome, as he focused a mind as keen on the open range as over a stud poker game, on the little milliner's problems. "Don't look to me like you're gettin' much top stuff out of this herd. The Mexicans may be good for one or two among the gals or kids. The married ones are a total loss—nothing but black shawls for them."

"I'm afraid I've bothered you too much with my affairs—" Sally Ann was suddenly conscious that maybe she had been too confiding with this total stranger.

But Dick had no notion of breaking up the ways-and-means conference just when he was beginning to find it most interesting. And he didn't ever remember before anything half so fascinating as watching the big blue eyes of Sally Ann shine with enthusiasm, the sweet red mouth curve into a smile, or, more devastating still to his masculine heart, pucker into worried bewilderment.

Warner was in La Mesa on his regular monthly trip to obtain supplies for his ranch. His weather-beaten little truck, heavily laden, stood in the hotel garage ready for the forty-mile return journey over desert roads to his lonely home. But on the hotel porch Dick had whiled away the golden morning hours with his eyes on the brave little sign that heralded "Sally Ann's Shoppe." There it hung, directly in his line of vision, across the dusty main street from La Mesa hotel.

The "shoppe" part of the new establishment worried Dick considerably.

"Now, I ain't much of a speller," he mused, smoking thoughtfully. "But that 'shoppie' business ain't Mexican nor it ain't United States. Whyinell couldn't she spell it right?"

The sight of a somewhat anxious little face peering frequently from the tiny window, or coming to the door at intervals to glance up and down the hot deserted street, likewise increased Dick's misery. Finally, unable to stand the strain longer, he had ventured to inquire a little more closely into the affairs of the "Shoppe," thereby meeting at close range the little proprietress.

"Did you really want to get a hat for someone?" Sally Ann was asking again, fumbling busily with the window cord to shut out the afternoon sun.

"You bet! I'll leave it to you, you know better'n me what to pick out—"

"Is she dark or light, tall or short, old or—or young?" inquired Sally Ann.

"Oh, kinda small and kinda brown—"

"Brown hair? The very thing—how would this do?" Sally Ann flew to a wide-brimmed affair, laden with a quantity of stunning pink rosebuds, so natural one could almost smell their fragrance, oh, such a delectable hat, a coquettish hat!

"I'll take it," said Dick, promptly.

"How much?"

"Ten dollars!" Sally Ann tingled to her very toes. Was it too much? Was he really going to buy it?

He was—and did.

"Can you wrap it up or something?"

A ten-dollar bill was laid nonchalantly on the showcase, and Dick picked up his purchase.

"Are you sure—that is—does it *really* suit you?" Sally Ann was breathless. It was her first real "sale" in this dusty, ugly, impossible little town, which she was trying so hard to like.

"Sure, it's great!"

Dick turned to leave, then stood awkwardly for a moment, twirling his sombrero nervously.

"Say, don't go being discouraged now, will you?" he offered at last. "There's some folks out my way that'll be wanting hats when they see what I'm bringin'. Wouldn't be surprised if I didn't have some orders from 'em next time I come in."

Sally Ann's eyes were brighter than ever for a moment with quick tears.

"Oh, you've brought me luck, Mr. Warner," she smiled gratefully. "I just felt it when you came in—"

It was two weeks later that old August, dozing peacefully in the comfort of the late afternoon coolness, was awakened by a playful rap across the soles of his broad shoes where they reposed high on the counter.

"Ach, py Gott, Mr. Varner, ain't you du weeks early alretty?"

"That's what I am, August, an' just when I'm busiest, too. Had to come all the way in for an important letter I was expectin'. Ran low on sugar, too, busted the sack on my way out last time and lost most of it. Any mail here for me?"

"Noddings, yet." August's eyes were still round with amazement. This was indeed out of the established order of things, for Dick Warner had been stopping with him now for five years at once-a-month intervals. This off-schedule visit frankly aroused the old hotel keeper's curiosity.

In the room that he always occupied, Dick proceeded to remove some of the dust and grime resulting from his trip down from Skyline Ranch.

He ate a leisurely early dinner served him by faithful old Chung Gee, and then sauntered to the porch. In the gathering twilight, Sally Ann's little "Shoppe" stared defiantly back at him; holding its own gallantly, it seemed to whisper across the intervening roadway.

Sally Ann, flushing with surprise and delight, welcomed him heartily as his broad shoulders filled her doorway.

"Why, it's Mr. Warner!" she exclaimed, going toward him. "I'll always remember that you brought a turn in my luck!"

Dick grinned, embarrassed. "Did I—did you honest have good luck since?"

"*Honest!* I've sold two hats, one of them's paid for, and the other's going to be soon, maybe Saturday night!"

"Not so worse," remarked Dick, "and I've got orders for some more. Mrs. Vacarelli, she's the wife of one of my sheepherders, wants you to send her something, and also a hat for the baby, about a six-months' old size."

Sally Ann's adorable lips pursed in deep thought. If Dick hadn't been positive before of his reason for coming to town, he would have been now as he gazed at her.

"Six months!" she exclaimed finally. "Don't know as I've got anything so youthful, but—" loath to loose a possible one of her few customers—"just wait, I'll find her something!"

"An' besides those, I got orders for three more to take out with me."

"Three *more!*" Sally Ann clasped her hands tightly, while she could scarcely credit her hearing. "You really mean it?"

"Sure do! Fix 'em up for me. I gotta go back to-morrow—waitin' for an important letter."

And then, because Sally Ann craved details as to the particular types of femi-

ninity that intended wearing the hats, Dick was put to his wit's ends endeavoring to make his answers at least sound lucid.

Strangely enough, however, after a while, the subject of hats and the fortunes of the little "Shoppe" were forgotten. Dick found himself confiding to small Sally Ann of the starry eyes, all about his beloved Skyline Ranch, his lonely pioneering years, his hopes and dreams, and the vision of their fulfillment. The old, old story of the homesteader, with his eagerness and his ignorance, his determined battle for just a foothold, the glorious satisfaction when victory is at last in sight.

The next day his purchases awaited him, and Sally Ann naively endeavored to arouse his comment on them. She wanted so much to be sure of his approval.

"They're fine," he assured her, smilingly. "And if the folks that's got to wear 'em don't think so too, they just ain't got good sense." Something in the warmth of his glance caused Sally Ann to blush rosily and turn her eyes away.

Six crisp, new five-dollar bills reposed in her slender purse, and four of her loveliest creations and the elaborate bonnet for the Vacarelli baby, which had caused her to sit up until the early hours of dawn to finish, were carefully stowed away in Dick's trunk.

The important letter had not put in its appearance by the end of the second day of Dick's visit, and he prepared to again take the homeward trail.

His usually lonely ride across the miles of endless sage and mesquite was bright now with the thoughts that crowded in on him. Mirage-like, ahead of him, floated the picture of a starry-eyed girl set like a jewel high up in the distant mountains where reposed his Skyline Ranch.

"Plumb foolish!" he at last muttered angrily to himself, sending the truck hurtling over the narrow trail. "I gotta snap out of it and come down to earth. She don't belong out here! Only thing to do is help her make money to go back to California. Askin' her to share your shack, you damn fool!"

Another two weeks had passed since Dick's memorable buying orgie, and Sally Ann looked up to see a stranger entering her little shop—at least the newcomer was a stranger to Sally Ann.

"Well!" boomed the woman, in a voice that grated harshly. "So this is where I come to get me a hat, huh? For style and such, I hear you ain't to be beat!"

Sally Ann murmured a conventional reply. "Rawboned" was a term that would have fitted her completely. A face, brown and weather-beaten from long exposure to the desert wind and sun, out of which looked a pair of keen gray eyes that seemed to bore, gimlet-like, into Sally Ann's very soul. A strange antipathy to the visitor took possession of her. And for her part, Martha Riley was experiencing exactly the same dislike with an added feeling of distinct antagonism.

"Will you try some of them on?" Sally Ann inquired, coldly polite.

"Might as well, though I ain't so particular—jest so's I don't git the same kind as Dick Warner's been buying for his horses and cows and Portuguese help—"

Sally Ann's startled blue eyes met the little gimlet ones of her visitor, and Martha felt the shot had gone home.

"Honest, I never laughed so much in my life," she continued, casually picking up a stiff straw and examining it. "My ranch is jest on the other side of Warner's, and a few days ago, when I drove over there on business, I nearly fell off my horse when I saw his old mare with a nice fancy bonnet on her head, ears stuck up through as smart as you please. Went on up to the house, and there was the Vacarelli woman outside her cabin bending over the washtub, and jest the swellest bunch o' millinery on her head you could imagine. An' the baby sitting up outside the door all dolled up like a Christmas tree!"

"Mr. Warner bought them, I guess he had a right—" began Sally Ann stiffly.

"Sure, I know he did!" Again the loud grating laugh shattered the atmosphere. "Just then I saw Dick himself goin' to the corral an' I says 'How come all the fancy millinery? This how you're throwin'

your money away now?' You know Dick an' me's such old friends, in fact, we're practically the same as engaged."

"I—I see!" said her listener faintly.

"Yes, ever since Tim Riley passed out with a bullet in his neck, we been thinkin' it wouldn't be a bad idea to join up Skyline Ranch with the M-R outfit."

"Did you say you'd like this one?" Sally Ann interrupted, suddenly weary of the visitor, of her jarring voice and her voluble conversation which held a strange menace. She desired intensely to be alone. But Mrs. Riley was not yet sure that her full mission had been accomplished. In her last interview with Dick Warner, she had sensed more than he would have imagined, and she was determined to nip in the bud any incipient mutual interest between these two.

"This'll do as good as any," she answered Sally Ann's question. "I always say it ain't what you got on your head, it's what's in it that counts. How much?" And then, as she extracted several bills from an ample pocketbook, she continued, "Next time you run across Dick down here you'd better call him down good an' hard for makin' fun of your nice millinery that-a-way. 'Course men've simply got to always joke about something, but Dick should've known better. If you could have seen old Bess cropping away with that big hat on! Laugh—I nearly died—"

But before she had finished, Sally Ann's gaze was drawn past her to the doorway. There Dick Warner lounged, hat in hand, waiting for Sally Ann's tormentor to halt.

"Well, Martha, what are you up to now?" he inquired pleasantly, meeting Sally Ann's look. "What's the good advice you're giving little Miss Sally?"

Mrs. Riley had the grace to look uncomfortable while she attempted a laugh.

"Just been buyin' a hat from her," she announced. "After seein' them blossomin' all over your ranch I got the idea myself. Shows it pays to advertise—"

With this final shot and a shrug, she departed, leaving the man and girl facing each other. Dick regarded her gravely, while Sally Ann fought to keep back the fears which just would intrude.

"She—she said you—you were making fun of my hats, that you were getting them for your horses and cows and—and everything—" began Sally Ann shakily.

Dick uttered a swear-word which, under the circumstances, was quite excusable.

"Sally Ann—" he begged, miserably.

"And that isn't all! She had a *right* to say all she did, 'cause she's going to marry you—" This time, two big tears spilled over and rolled down the pink cheeks.

"That's the first I knew about it, Sally Ann, honest. An' she'd sure have to rope and hogtie me to git me to the preacher. But you—you got me eatin' right out o' your little hand, Sally Ann. That's what I come down for to-day—I gotta tell you I can't think of nothin' or nobody but you. Would it be askin' too much for you to marry me an' come back with me to Skyline Ranch? Lord, I'm crazy 'bout you, Sally Ann—"

"But—but those hats—you *were* just poking fun at my work—" Sally Ann's pride was still smarting.

"That wasn't no fun," Dick explained earnestly. "I wanted to buy something to get the little shop started. And Mrs. Vacarelli and the kid are just wild about 'em, while old Bess, my mare, always has a new straw every spring to protect her from the sun. Just because this one happened to be a little more expensive, you wouldn't mind now, would you, Sally Ann?" Dick drew two little hands gently up against his lips. Then he turned a sweet flushed face around to meet his eyes.

"And you know the one with the pink roses, that first one," he went on. "Gee, it's a beaut! I've been saving that, hoping maybe you'd come up to wear it yourself—" This last was lost entirely in Sally Ann's soft curls.

Sometime afterward, when dusk had enveloped the little shop, Dick thought of his lonely Skyline Ranch which soon would be lonely no longer.

"An', sweet," he whispered softly in the little ear close to his heart, "that Vacarelli kid's bonnet—can you make any more like that?"

"Sure, lots of 'em!" answered Sally Ann, happily.

Figgerin' Jim

By John Geddie Macdonald

When a little gal from Kansas City drops into Paint Creek the hombres take notice muy pronto — and then, romance bein' on the air, there's a mad scramble to tune in.

IN the modern parlance, things were "tight" in Kansas City, a fact which came home with striking force to Joan Bailey, who, at the time of our story, was the fifth of a century old and a defiant challenge to the assumptive statement that men prefer blondes.

Going briefly into details, Joan at the moment was in tears. She was slicing an onion, when a mischievous curl, peeping over to see what its mistress was doing, lost its balance and fell over an exceedingly pretty nose. Failing to relinquish the onion, Joan raised a hand that offered an ideal background for a three-quarter-caret diamond to replace the curl —hence the tears.

A potato was next received into fellowship with the onion in a diminutive boiler. "Now," said Joan, "my kingdom for some meat." And because she was strongly pro-optimistic and more or less of a fatalist, she put her tiny larder through a Bertillon System survey only to find it a twin of Mother Hubbard's cupboard. But Joan refused to be disheartened. "Perhaps Amy," she mused, and crossed the hall to where, by economy and two days a week in a florist's shop, Amy Tureman existed.

But alas for dauntless hopes, meat was as foreign to Amy's rendezvous as toadstools to the Death Valley. However, on the bureau was a package wrapped in a sadly soiled copy of the Kansas City Star. Joan wasn't curious, but because she was hungry, she investigated. It was only a pair of tiny slippers Amy had been having repaired. Joan, however, spied the personal column in the advertising section and, from force of habit, read it.

Across the hall the vegetarian stew burned merrily, its sole owner was engrossed.

"Girls, this is an age of daring. If you are tired of trying to get something from nothing and feel like coming to Paint Creek, Arizona, and taking a chance on a seventy-two inch cowboy who is kind

and sound, take this to any reliable bank. Don't come too fat or too skinny. Apart from that, let your conscience be your guide."

Appropriating the unique advertisement, Joan carefully re-wrapped the package and returned to her room. Amy was, at the moment, coming along the hall. "What's that burning?" she asked.

"Oh," announced Joan a bit guiltily, "I was making a stew. Guess I left the gas too high; still it isn't much loss. Say, Amy, you've studied geography since I have, just what is Arizona like?"

"It's a horrid old place full of petrified forests, canyons, deserts, rattlesnakes and cowboys," was the forlorn answer. "What do you want to know for?"

"Oh, nothing," murmured Joan, "just wondering. Are you sure you haven't flattered it? Well, I must trot along now. See you later." With this, Joan donned a natty little suit she had made over herself, adjusted a trim, silver turban to her black curls and went forth to take adventure by the horns. An hour later she blushingly presented the "advertisement" to the cashier of the Second National Bank. To Joan's delight he exhibited no surprise and, after a brief scrutiny of the bit of paper, turned his piercing eyes on her.

"Yes," he opened with a faint smile fighting for a foothold on his bleak face, "it seems that every bank in this city has been authorized by the Citizen's Bank of Paint Creek, Arizona, to honor this advertisement and advance the bearer—providing same is adjudged suitable by the bank applied to — two hundred and fifty dollars."

"But do you think the proposition is genuine?" asked Joan, trying to keep her voice steady.

"I do," answered the cashier. "Furthermore, you are a free agent until you have met the donor."

"But providing more than one girl answers?" pursued Joan in a clutch of fear lest even now the opportunity hung in the balance.

The cashier shook his head assuringly. "Once the advance is made, the offer ceases automatically; therefore, before giving you the money, I must get in touch with the other banks. Will you call back in an hour's time?"

But Joan was determined to build her house of adventure upon a rock. "The offer was contingent upon the payee's opinion of the applicant, was it not?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Then you think I'll suit?" She blushed as she felt his gaze point blank upon her.

"I will vouch for you," he answered simply.

In an hour's time Joan was back. "It's all right," informed the cashier, as he passed Joan crisp bank notes to the extent of two hundred and fifty dollars. "I'm satisfied this fellow is out for a square deal, and here is my address should things miscarry."

"I was wondering if you knew his name?" came Joan timidly.

"Certainly, here it is on the letter. Steve MacCoy."

"Steve, dear," mused Joan as she departed. "If I don't love you to death when I get there, I deserve seven years bad luck."

At a well stocked delicatessen in the neighborhood of her headquarters Joan purchased lavishly of such good things as could be prepared in a scant room with an evil-smelling gasplate the sole facility. Her arms were so full of bundles that, on reaching her room, she had to summon Amy to open the door.

"Whoppee old timer!" came the startled Amy. "In the words of Mutt and Jeff, what the—?"

"That little bag in my left hand, quick, it's eggs!" cut in Joan who was doing a mitigated Charleston to avoid collapse.

"Eggs," sputtered Amy leaping to rescue the threatened bag, "at sixty cents a dozen! Eggs! You don't mean to insinuate that we—I mean you—are going to eat them! Joan, tell me, have you garnisheed Tom Mix's salary or has your ship come in? Dill pickles and—Joan, dear, if that big round thing with a hub of bone in the center is real old-fashioned ham, why, bring me the smelling salts at once."

"That," voiced Joan sighing with relief at being unburdened, "is none other than 'the ham what am' minus, as you will no doubt notice, the colored chef. And as for my ship coming in, the whole fleet is at this moment riding lazily at anchor."

"And do you mean that I'm going to be in on this feast?" asked Amy.

"Aw, talk sense," chuckled Joan, "and let's get busy."

Emulating an interpretative dancer, Amy crossed to her room for a dainty apron, and in an amazingly short time the record-breaking repast was in readiness.

"Love at first bite," drawled Joan, as she sank her pearly teeth into a generous slab of ham. "I feel," she went on joyously, "like a circus elephant on hearing that the embargo has been lifted on peanuts. Ripsnortin' show down at Keith's, ol' pard," she announced imitating the vernacular of the West.

"Show," echoed Amy, brazenly sopping up the last of the ham gravy with a piece of bread. "It's been so long since I've seen a show that I've forgotten what they are like. Cross your heart, Joan, don't you want that other egg?"

"I swear it," answered Joan with mock seriousness. "Let's hurry and clean up this mess," she enjoined. "I'm r'arin' to go out and have a regular jamboree. No—" in answer to a questioning glance from Amy—"I won't satisfy your curiosity until we get back."

After a wonderful evening, Joan broke the news.

Amy was aghast. "Joan, you're mad; worse than mad! A man you've never seen, and Arizona; why it's preposterous! He'll probably take you to some isolated cabin and work you to death; or he may be a maniac and want you for experimental purposes. Oh, Joan, give him his horrid money back."

"Can't," said Joan a bit wobbily. "I've spent seven dollars and twenty cents of it."

Suddenly Amy saw a ray of hope. "You could take his picture to a fortune teller and maybe get an idea of what he's like," she suggested.

"But I haven't a picture."

"Now, I'm positive you're crazy!" stormed Amy. "I'll just bet there's a catch to that advertisement. More than likely he's bald, bow-legged and has a paunch. It wouldn't surprise me in the least if he had a hairlip. You simply must not do it, Joan."

"Looks to me," returned Joan bravely, "as if you had it in for Arizona and Steve MacCoy. But I'm going just the same."

And that very night Joan dispatched a letter marked "Important" to a certain man at Paint Creek, Arizona; and three days later she started for that destination.

"I still consider you crazy to go," contended Amy as she bade Joan good-bye. "But if you see a good opening for a girl like me out there, let me know."

With just enough powder on her pretty nose, Joan waited in the pullman vestibule as the "Limited" whistled for Paint Creek. While Amy's wailings and calamitous possibilities were still fresh in her memory, she was reasonably composed. In a sense, however, she was considerably worked up over the prospect of being kissed upon arrival; well, providing she was, girls had been known to survive that ordeal. A glance in a mirrored panel told her she was blushing. The effect was gratifying and she wished the unknown Mr. MacCoy was on hand at the moment. Suddenly she gave a funny little shiver. The train had stopped.

Joan swept the environment for the movie-variety stage-coach or buckboard drawn by the inevitable undomesticated broncos. To her surprise, however, nothing of like nature was in evidence; and furthermore, there was no one to meet her. In front of Dad Hillman's store, which was almost directly across the street, a man was swinging from a jaded, sorrel horse. As if afraid of losing the only chance offered to learn something essential, Joan eagerly advanced. "Is Mr. Steve MacCoy in town?" she asked.

The man who was none other than "Figgerin' Jim" Orr, the sheriff, eyed Joan over the withers of his horse and answered, "Not to my knowin'. Was you expectin' him to meet you?"

"Well, not especially," returned Joan guardedly. "Can you recommend me to a good hotel?"

"Silver Dollar next to the bank is the only hotel in this town. Figger Missus Carter, the woman who runs it, will use you right."

Joan thanked him, picked up her bags and set out for the bare two-story building which was identified by a sadly soiled sign. It didn't look so inviting to Joan, and her lips sagged slightly as she mused, "Arizona and Steve MacCoy, you'll both have to do better than this or I'll be forced to think that Amy was right." Then, before she could moralize further, a motherly looking woman appeared and took her in charge.

In front of Dad Hillman's store the sheriff leaned heavily against his horse. His eyes, clear and blue as the sky overhead, were looking nowhere, and his broad, well-rounded forehead was drawn in thought. Suddenly, like a man who has been wandering in a maze and unexpectedly come into the open, he drew himself together and ejaculated, "Snortin' brimstone!" Fumbling in his pockets, he produced, in a badly crumpled condition, the letter Joan had written Steve MacCoy. Wheeling, he went up the steps of the store like a boy who, knowing his guilt, is advancing for the inevitable punishment.

Contrary to good business tactics, Dad Hillman was taking advantage of a brief lull in the commercial activity of Paint Creek to indulge in a "siesta" over a partly emptied case of Carnation Milk. The sheriff was glad of this, it gave him a chance to get himself in hand. When ready, he reached out and shook Dad gently.

"Tin o' Velvet, Sheriff?" speculated Dad drowsily, shambling towards the tobacco case.

"No, all stocked up on smokin', Dad. I just woke you to say that I plumb forgot to deliver that letter you gave me for Steve MacCoy; shoot me for a peg-legged centipede if I didn't."

"An' it was marked 'important' too," reminded Dad.

"I figger," came the sheriff soberly, "that it was damn' important. A girl just now got off the 'Limited' an' asked for Steve MacCoy."

"A girl!" said Dad in surprise. "Maybe she's an aunt o' Steve's."

"Yeah, a girl," drawled the sheriff. "She's purtier than a Mexican sunset, an' if she's Steve's aunt, I'm a full-blooded sister of ol' Settin' Bull."

"By cracky, Sheriff, looks like you've messed up the social life of our li'l' town for fair," chided Dad. "I gave you the letter 'count it was marked important an' you was ridin' plumb past Steve's ranch."

"Everything you're sayin' is true," admitted the sheriff. "But I never gave the doggoned letter a thought, till this girl pops up an' asks for Steve."

"What become of her?" asked Dad.

"She's puttin' up at the Silver Dollar," answered the sheriff. "She was plumb disappointed at not seein' Steve." He paused at a shadow in the door and looked up to see Curt Outhit, the bankers son.

"Cravin' three of your best cigars, Dad," voiced Curt, coming forward. "Keep one yourself ol' timer, an' you too, Sheriff. How's tricks?"

"So—so," offered Dad cordially. "How's the new roadster workin'?"

"Ain't bucked nary a time since I got her," vouched Curt easing to the door.

The sheriff was next to depart, which he did in deep perplexity.

"Jim Orr," soliloquized Dad, as he watched the big sheriff swing into his saddle, "you're as good a sheriff as there is in the State; but you've got no more use for system than a bull frog has for Siberia. I wouldn't blame Steve if he plugs you on sight."

Refreshed by rest and food, Joan stepped Juliet-like out on a small balcony which afforded a good view of the main and only street of Paint Creek. By sheer force of contrast, the colorful outlook held the girl spellbound. To her, there was romance even in the stiff-legged cowponies loping through the heavy dust or swerving in at some well-scarred hitching pole before the favorite rendezvous of their riders; while at frequent intervals

the picture was enlivened by some dashing rider who emulated all the swash-buckling flare of bygone days. One of a small group of loungers in front of the farrier's shop, a Mexican "vaquero," was picking snatches of Spanish love songs from a guitar. To westward, the sun, a rose-gold pool, was dropping bashfully as if to woo a horizon of serrated buttes among which purple shadows were nesting swift and gracefully as homing pigeons. Before the Citizen's Bank a young man of pleasing dress and manner entered a long, underslung yellow roadster and rolled easily towards the hotel. A few minutes later there was a rap at Joan's door.

"Gentleman to see you in the parlor."

All the way from Kansas City to Paint Creek Joan had been rehearsing for this particular occasion. It was understood that she was to smile reservedly and remark questioningly: "Mr. MacCoy?" But, when she reached the parlor and found the man who had driven up in the big roadster, she forgot her lines and didn't say a word. It was he who advanced and asked, "Miss Bailey?"

"Yes," stammered Joan. "Gosh! He's good-looking," she thought.

"Heard of your arrival an' was dog-goned sorry I wasn't able to meet you. Reckon you'd like to take a li'l' ride?"

Joan gave her consent, and they went down and entered the roadster. Joan noted, slyly of course, that the car was virtually new and one of the best makes —a Studebaker to be exact.

"Makin' you comfortable at the Silver Dollar?" he asked.

"Yes, indeed," assured Joan.

"Reckon you're as well there as anywhere till you get acquainted," he said. "Missus Carter's a mighty fine woman an' I'm shore she'll take care of you." This with a few trifling remarks made up the bulk of the conversation. Yet, to Joan, the silence made the ride doubly wonderful and she was in high spirits as they returned to the hotel.

"I have some surplus money that I wish to return to you, Mr. MacCoy," said Joan as she fumbled in her bag on getting out of the car.

"Keep it," he ordered. Then, after Joan had left, he picked up a small piece of paper she had dropped. On reaching home he pondered long over this selfsame scrap of paper; it was none other than the advertisement Joan had cut out of the Kansas City Star.

It was on the verge of noon next day when Mrs. Carter asked a favor of Joan. "Makin' hot biscuits for dinner an' I'm plumb out of baking powder. Reckon you'd slip up to Dad Hillman's an' get me a tin of Rumford's?"

"Of course," said Joan. As she entered the store she saw there was only one other customer—a tall, slender cowpuncher who was busy looking over Dad's stock of chaps. His back was to Joan and she took advantage of this to give the splendidly knit figure a close scrutiny. In other words, she was out to make comparisons among the men of Paint Creek.

Dad approached from the box-like place he used in catering to the simple needs of Paint Creek in the postal line. He had a letter in his hand which he threw upon the counter almost under Joan's nose. "Mail for you, Steve," he remarked, shyly eyeing Joan the while.

Joan heard the man addressed as "Steve" approach, but she didn't turn her head. Her eyes were rivetted on the letter. Plain as the nose on her face, it was none other than the one she had written to a Mr. Steve MacCoy of Paint Creek, Arizona. "A can of Rumford's Baking Powder, please," she murmured imploringly of Dad. She cut her gaze slightly as a well-shaped, bronzed hand reached for the letter. If only Dad would hurry.

"Have to open a new case," commented Dad after a thorough survey of his shelves.

Joan wanted to flee, but then Mrs. Carter's biscuits were at stake; so retreat was out of the question. Her brain was awhirl with questions she could not answer. If this was Steve MacCoy—and it must be, as he was even now opening the letter—who was the man who had taken her out last night in the dashing roadster?

Dad came shambling up with a case of

baking powder in his arms. Depositing it on the counter, he fumbled for an opener.

"Dad," spoke up the man at Joan's side with the deliberation of a judge pronouncing a heavy sentence, "there's something rotten an' it ain't in Denmark."

Dad knew it was risky to encourage the speaker, but he was bound to make some comment, so he said: "Just what do you mean?"

"Some polecat has double-crossed me by holdin' up this letter," fired Steve in a dangerous tone.

"Please hurry," said Joan.

Dad passed the purchase over the counter, but Joan's nervous clutch failed to retain it and the can rolled merrily to the door.

With a graceful lunge, Steve reclaimed the package and presented it to Joan. "You are Miss Bailey of Kansas City, I take it?" he ventured thoughtfully.

Joan nodded, accepted the baking powder and hurried away. "Just wish Amy could see my Steve MacCoy," thought the girl as she walked back to the hotel. "He's even better looking than that impostor of last night."

"Dad," said Steve, "I'm cravin' particulars in this here 'plot.' An' I'm warnin' you to shoot fast an' straight across the board."

"Sheriff left word for you to call on him soon as you come in," answered Dad. "Reckon he can put you right."

Straight to the sheriff went the irate Steve, and he saw at once that his visit was expected.

"I'm plumb defunct in the li'l' things of life, Steve," the sheriff said, "that's how come I overlooked the letter Dad sent you by me."

"This here blunder of yours may be small in your opinion, Sheriff," grumbled Steve, "but it's a doggoned big issue with me."

"Hold your hosses, cowboy," said the sheriff good-naturedly. "Providin' you've ever studied history, you'll see that Adam, Napoleon, and a few other hombres has made mistakes as well as me. I'll admit I got you into a tight hole, but I'm also goin' to get you out. An' here's how I figger to operate. Curt Outhit, the banker's boy, took Miss Bailey ridin' last night. Now you're takin' her to-night."

"Swell chance of her wantin' to come with me after bein' out with Curt in that three-thousand-dollar car of his," growled Steve.

"You're a-goin' to use the same car to-night," announced the sheriff.

"I ain't askin' no favors of Curt Outhit," shot Steve.

"You ain't obliged to," retorted the sheriff. "I'm holdin' myself responsible for this mixup, and I figger it's up to me to see fair play. Curt played the first hand; maybe he played square, maybe not. But you'll have the same chance to-night, an' from then on it'll be fifty-fifty 'tween you an' Curt till one of you scoops up the girl. That's that. Now run along an' be on hand to-night at Dad Hillman's store."

Once Steve had departed, the sheriff sought out Curt Outhit. "Curt," he began grimly, "you double-crossed Steve last night on that girl deal an' he's holdin' me responsible, which is right an' proper, owin' to my overlookin' to give him the letter from Miss Bailey. Now I'm askin' you a fair question. Are you goin' to quit this girl or not?"

"Any quittin' orders will have to come from Miss Bailey, Sheriff," gave back Curt. "Anyhow, ain't all fair in love an' war?"

"All's goin' to be fair in this case, Curt Outhit," answered the sheriff, with an unmistakeable warning in his tone.

"Meanin' what?" asked Curt, plainly perplexed.

"That you're goin' to give Steve an even break in this contest. He's takin' Miss Bailey ridin' to-night, an he's takin' her in your new car."

"Would you mind repeatin' that, Sheriff?" drawled Curt. "Reckon my hearin's failin'."

The sheriff ignored the other's taunt and in defense of his actions remarked: "I've bin dooly elected sheriff of this county, Curt, an' as you know it's my sworn duty to preserve law an' order. Unless you do as I suggest, you'll be di-

rectly responsible for provokin' Steve MacCoy to threatenin' action. An' you know as well as I do that Steve's a bad hombre to tease."

"What's the rest of your programme?" invited Curt, inwardly admitting his guilt and realizing the fairness of the sheriff's scheme.

"Namely, for you to split this opportunity with Steve," stated the sheriff. "By that, I mean he's to have the chance to use your car for courtin' purposes. Of course he'll have to go halfers with you on gas, tires, wear an' tear. Same contract to continue in force till Miss Bailey decides which of you she loves."

The sheriff's next encounter was with Joan. "I aim to tell you at the beginnin'," he stammered, "that I ain't here in the capacity of a suitor, but to straighten out a li'l' tangle I'm directly responsible for. You figgered Curt Outhit was Steve MacCoy, didn't you?"

"Yes," answered Joan, desperately trying to see what was coming. "You see I addressed him as Mr. MacCoy and he let the error stand."

"Purty slick hombre, that Curt, purty slick," was the sheriff's comment.

"But he was awfully nice," threw in Joan, determined to defend her lack of caution.

"That's the worst of it," drawled the sheriff. "Both Curt an' Steve is tiptop fellers. Now, here's the proposition I made to 'em: Steve's goin' to take you ridin' to-night—providin', of course, you're willin'—an' from then on, they're to break fifty-fifty."

"I think that's fair to all," said Joan, "but in a way Mr. Outhit is handicapped because I got the money to come West with from Mr. MacCoy."

"In that case, I figger I'll have to refund that money to Steve, an' then the man who wins you can pay me," was the sheriff's suggestion.

Steve could hardly believe his eyes when that night he was approached by Curt and informed that the gleaming Studebaker was at his disposal. He was circling the car suspiciously, eyeing the tires and measuring up the gas, when the sheriff put in appearance and handed him two hundred and fifty dollars. "You're shore actin' white, Sheriff," said Steve pocketing the money.

"How long do you reckon this contest will last, Steve?" asked the sheriff.

"Sheriff," responded Steve with his customary deliberation, "I'm lookin' for this thing to string out 'bout as bad as a Democratic Convention. Speakin' confidential, winnin' women is one of the fine arts; it takes time an' skill. An' further, I ain't goin' behind anyone's back to say that I don't think Curt has a chance. Well, so long."

As the sheriff wheeled to enter the store, he ran into Curt. "Think your chance purty fair to win, Curt?" he asked.

Curt laughed easily. "Sheriff, you're doin' me a favor in bringin' Steve into this."

"How come?" asked the sheriff.

"Why, it's goin' to make me show up like a searchlight on a dark night. Steve's no menace to me, he's too cautious. Lovemakin' ain't an art, Sheriff, it's a science. Don't pay to trail women along like a sick cow; you gotta ride up an' stampede 'em before they get a chance to find out what it's all about. Warnin' you as a friend, Sheriff, I'll have that li'l' girl hogtied inside of three weeks."

"'Pears like you both got different systems," said the sheriff, "but, not bein' a woman's man, I ain't in a position to vouch for either. I'm only responsible for fair play."

Thus it was that Paint Creek settled down with a dry chuckle to watch the march of events. Both Steve and Curt had plenty of backers, and various small wagers were laid in a friendly spirit by the two factions that their respective man would win. For his part in engineering the unique contest, the sheriff rode high and handsome on a wave of enthusiastic popularity, being humorously hailed as a man of brains and a double-barreled square-shooter. After a period of suspense, it was rumored and vouched for by Mrs. Carter, who had Joan under her motherly wing, that the contestants were running neck and neck. Joan admitted

both the young men were splendid.

This state of affairs carried on until the Triple X dance, which was the premier event in the social calendar of Paint Creek. Adjudging this a special occasion, the sheriff insisted that the two Romeo's draw straws. The drawing took place in Dad Hillman's store the night before the dance with no one present save Dad, the sheriff, and the two contestants. Fate threw the golden opportunity to Steve. The winner took his victory without acclaim. Curt seemed to accept defeat in good part, but under the skin the sheriff saw keen disappointment.

"Reckon you'll be at the dance to keep those young buckaroos in their place, Sheriff?" said Dad.

"Darsn't, Dad," responded the sheriff, "got a hot tip li'l' while back that the 'White-Hat Bandit' might breeze 'long this way, an' I figger it's my official duty to be on hand to receive him an' show him the sights. Darin' cuss, Dad. Holds up everything from sweethearts to cyclones."

Steve and Joan arrived at the Tripple X Ranch without mishap and enjoyed every bit of the evening's entertainment. Neither Curt nor the sheriff was in attendance. It was well after three o'clock when the weary but happy merry-makers set out for their homes. Nid-nodding at the wheel of the velvet-running roadster, Steve had reached Mesquite Ridge—a rather unexpected break in the comparatively level country and so-called from a matted growth of mesquite—when two shots bit into the placid setting. Two others, somewhat more explosive in volume, followed in quick succession. Then a shrill wheeze of escaping air came from the rear of the car.

Unable to make out anything tangible in the foreground, Steve went to the rear and found both tires flat. As he fumbled about, uncertain just how to proceed, he heard a scream from the front and, rushing up, saw a white-hatted and masked rider dashing off with Joan. Futile as the move was, Steve started in pursuit. There was no longer any trace of the rider, but the irate cowboy then and there decided to go on to Paint Creek and summon aid in recovering Joan. At this stage there was more shooting and another horseman appeared with Joan. It was the sheriff.

"Nice way to bring a girl from a dance," drawled the sheriff, pulling up his horse.

"I was messin' with the rear tires when some feller wearin' a white hat plunges outa the mesquite an' scoops her up," explained Steve. "I ain't packin' a gun to social affairs and I didn't happen to have a hoss in tow. Looks like if you was a regular sheriff you'd have things so 'tight' 'round here that a Robin Hood wouldn't dare show his nose, let alone carry off a feller's girl."

"What ails the car?" asked the sheriff, ignoring the insinuation.

"Couple of tires busted plumb open an' I only got one spare," wailed Steve.

"Figger the best thing to do is for me to take Miss Bailey back to town an' send you some help," suggested the sheriff. "Won't keep you sufferin' longer than necessary."

Steve stood dejectedly by the disabled roadster and watched the big sheriff ride off in the dim purple of dawn with Joan. It was full day when Curt arrived, and it took considerable time to get things in shape and underway. At a few yards from their starting point, Steve noticed a white hat lying just off the road and hopped out.

"That's the very hat that bandit wore last night," he sputtered. "I'm takin' it to town for evidence."

"We ain't got no time to stop to pick up fool clues," grumbled Curt. "Let the dang thing be where it is." But Steve had already reclaimed the telltale hat and was again in the car.

When the two somewhat disheartened Romeos rolled into Paint Creek, they found the sheriff enjoying a cigar on the steps of Dad Hillman's store.

"Here's a clue to that bandit, Sheriff," said Steve, presenting the sheriff with the white Stetson.

"By cracky!" chimed in Dad, appearing on the scene. "It's the White-Hat Bandit shore enough. How come you missed him, Sheriff?"

"Didn't have the heart to bring him in 'count of him bein' a particular friend of mine," was the sheriff's alibi. "Hey, Curt, come over an' help get at the bottom of this White-Hat Bandit feller."

Obviously not pleased at the invitation, Curt complied.

"You're a plumb failure as a milliner, Curt," spoke up the sheriff looking the other squarely in the eye, "or you'd know that in order to get paint dry you gotta use a lot of terpentine."

"What are you drivin' at?" asked Curt, threateningly.

"Drivin' at!" snapped the sheriff. "I mean that you fell for my li'l' trap 'bout the White-Hat Bandit an' tried to kidnap Miss Bailey."

"Then there ain't a real bandit by that title?" asked Dad. "By cracky!" he blustered suddenly. "I see now why you set aside a certain tin o' white paint an' asked me to sell that perticular one to Curt, providin' he wanted to buy paint."

"Yes, an' what's more," grinned the sheriff, "if Curt wants to examine the bottom of that same can, he'll find my initials. You see," he went on to explain, "I got a hunch that Curt was tired of playin' square; so I got down to business an' started to figger out some way to trap him. I sprung the White-Hat Bandit idea an' 'bout the time I figgered the dance would be over, I rode down to Mesquite Ridge which I knew was the logical place for such stuff; an' shore enough everything worked out plumb like I'd figgered."

"But where's Miss Bailey?" asked Steve with a hard look at Curt.

"The future Missus Jim Orr will appear once she's had a li'l' siesta an' gets the paint off her hands," was the answer.

"By cracky," sputtered Dad, "I never suspicioned, Sheriff, that you was a ladies' man."

"I wasn't till Curt an' Steve taught me," acknowledged the sheriff. "You see they was workin' two different systems, Curt playin' a rash hand an' Steve a cautious one; so I figgured 'tween the two extremes an' tried out a happy medium, an' it worked—shore's my name's Jim Orr."

"In my opinion you an' Curt are both crooks," fired Steve.

"Wait a minute, Steve," condoned the sheriff. "I figgered you'd be sorter sore, so I did some more brain work." Pulling a sadly crumpled letter from his pocket, he pased it to Steve. "It's to a li'l' pal of Joan's—Amy, I believe her name is—back in Kansas City. Joan says she's just the girl you want. Now here's the way I figgered things out. It's more or less risky bringin' a girl among a herd of love-hungry cowpunchers — as you've found out; so I figgered you'd best do your courtin' 'way from home. There's a through train for Kansas City due here in twenty minutes. You've got your Sunday clothes on an' I'll keep an eye on your ranch. An' Steve, you ain't morally bound to pay your half of them two tires Curt shot up this mornin' an' if I was you I wouldn't do it."

"That's what I was figgerin' myself, Sheriff," chuckled Steve. Then he reached for the letter and set out for the station to get his ticket.

Statement of the Ownership, Management, Circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, of Ranch Romances, published semi-monthly at New York, N. Y., for April 1, 1927. State of New York, County of New York, ss.: Before me, a Commissioner of Deeds in and for the State and County aforesaid, personally appeared B. Flynn, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the editor of the Ranch Romances Magazine and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Western Stories Publishing Corporation, 799 Broadway, New York City; Editor, B. Flynn, 799 Broadway, New York City; Managing Editor, F. McChesney, 799 Broadway, New York City; Business Manager, W. M. Clayton, 799 Broadway, New York City. 2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Western Stories Publishing Corporation stockholders, B. Flynn, H. Mayer, and Publishers' Fiscal Corporation stockholders, W. M. Clayton, N. Goldmann, all of 799 Broadway, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholders or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. B. Flynn. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 25th day of March, 1927. Thos. H. Smith, Commissioner of Deeds, New York City. (My Commission expires Feb. 10, 1929.)

Baird's Luck

By James W. Routh

Lady Luck refused to smile on Jack Baird, but then she's a fickle creature, and when she does smile—presto, our cowboy tucks the world—and the girl—in his pocket.

WITH a crooked smile twisting his firm lips, Jack Baird watched the profile of the girl who sat on the opposite end of the cross seat, between the motherly-looking woman who was evidently her companion, and the fat traveling man who as obviously was not. He had noticed her when he climbed on top of the stage for the last lap of the trip to Mesa, where the rodeo was to be held. There was something fascinating about the tilt of her nose and the curve of her cheek; something alluring in the gloss of her dark hair and the poise of her small head under its tightly fitting hat. His crooked smile expressed a bitterness of spirit which contrasted any hopes he might have had and the cold reality he knew.

The fat man became a nuisance, as fat men of his ilk sometimes do. The girl changed places with the motherly-looking woman, and altered her position so that Jack could see only the back of her head. The fat man never knew how near to annihilation he was at that moment. Perhaps it was fortunate for him that just then the stage jolted to a stop amid a burst of profanity from the bewhiskered driver, punctuated by the sharp crack of a gun. Jack's eyes jerked around.

"Hop out, all o' yuh!" rasped a harsh voice. "Hop out, an' line up with yore backs this way an' yore hands high!"

The driver spat disgustedly and wrapped the lines around the brake handle.

"You shore must be a green un, feller," he observed. "I ain't carryin' nothin' but passengers this trip."

"Close yore trap!" snarled the solitary bandit. He had a black mask over his face, and sat on a black horse at the side of the road, a six-gun in either hand. "Now yuh travelers—get a-goin'!"

The fat man grunted and wheezed fearfully as he lowered himself to the dust of the road. The motherly-looking woman turned white and gasped as she clung to the arm of the girl, who seemed utterly unafraid but mightily indignant. She helped the older woman down, however, and the other passengers followed, Jack among them. Inwardly Jack was cynically amused. The bandit must be a fool to take a chance like this. Now if it was him—

"Line up!" rasped the bandit. "Now, driver, yuh push that team down around to that bend an' stop. Not around it—jest to it. Get me?"

The stage rolled along, leaving the line of passengers standing in the dust and sun. Jack's cynicism deepened. He had mailed his entry fee from Tucson, and hadn't enough on him in cash to fight about. The bandit dismounted and started along the rear of the line of passengers, looking for weapons. He found one nickel-plated revolver, in the hip-pocket of a gentleman of Hebraic descent. When he came to Jack he hesitated, searched for a shoulder gun, and spoke gruffly.

"Step outa line, you. I need yore help."

Jack was watching the girl. Now for the first time she looked at him. Her eyes were dark blue and full of contempt.

"Yuh go plumb tuh hell," he told the bandit gently.

The man muttered an oath, but moved on. When he rounded the end of the line he issued more orders.

"Put yore arms down an' dig. Dump all yore valu'bles in this here chunk o' canvas—an' don't try to hold out on me! One at a time, now. Ikey, yuh start it."

Jack continued to contemplate the profile, now very indignant, of the girl. He wondered if, had he been in the place of the bandit, he would have robbed her. She looked as if she had little enough to give. Not that she was poorly dressed exactly, but she looked like a girl who had her own way to make. And probably cared for the elderly woman, too, he thought. Her mother, most likely. The two of them stood quite a distance down the line from Jack, whose meditation was interrupted by a curt order from the bandit for the white-haired woman to chuck her valuables into his canvas catch-all. Instantly the girl protested, flared up angrily and faced the man as if quite unafraid of an army of his kind.

"Shut up!" snarled the bandit. "Yuh get yore turn next, girlie. Let gramma dig now!"

He reached out to grasp the old lady's shoulder, but the girl struck down his arm and thrust herself protectingly between. There was a world of scorn in her flashing eyes. Jack felt some odd and unknown emotion stir within him, struggling against that load of bitter indifference.

"You coward! To rob an old woman! If there was a man—"

The bandit laughed contemptuously and waved his gun up and down the line threateningly. Jack felt his muscles begin to strain. Then the bandit pushed the girl violently aside, so that she almost fell, and grabbed the older woman savagely by the arm.

Jack, much to his surprise, found himself holding a gun in his hand, gripped by the barrel. On the ground, limp and lifeless, sprawled the bandit, no longer masked and entirely harmless. Jack stared in per-

fect astonishment at the man and at the gun. There must be some connection between them, but for the life of him he couldn't grasp it. Then the other passengers came to life and took charge of the situation. The stage came back. The fat man wheezed aboard. The motherly looking woman stumbled stiffly up the steps. The bandit, bound hand and foot, was bundled inside. Jack found himself sitting beside the bewhiskered stage driver, who talked to his team profanely and to Jack with a sort of deference.

"That was a nervy thing tuh do, pardner," said he.

Jack's lips twisted in that crooked half-smile. "No, I reckon it wasn't," he replied.

The driver looked at him curiously, then spoke to his team. After that he did not attempt to talk, and Jack relapsed into the odd frame of mind which had possessed him since luck played its last unkind trick.

In due time they reached Mesa, and having no baggage except his blanket roll and the saddle he had shipped by express, Jack got down on the far side of the stage and slipped into the crowd which was eagerly demanding details of the attempted hold-up. His saddle had arrived before him, he found, and he lugged it to the smaller of the two hotels in town, where he dropped it and his blanket roll in a room before going to see the rodeo officials about the registration that he had mailed them. There was no trouble about it, and he got his number and the name of the horse he had drawn for the opening day, to-morrow.

After this Jack wandered off to be by himself. The whole affair had developed so rapidly that he had hardly had time to realize it even yet. In the fast growing darkness he was able to avoid human contacts and think. So much the day had done for him. Until now he had been unable to think connectedly.

It was a long chance, this coming to ride in the rodeo. Two years ago he had quit the game, in which, as in other things, the breaks had gone against him with unbeatable persistence. Never better than third place was he able to rate. Burt had persuaded him to cut it out and tackle the ranch, pooling their bankrolls to do it. Now he was coming back in desperation, broke, with Burt in dire need. But it *was* a chance, even if it had been impulse chiefly that brought him. There were cash prizes for first and second places. Mesa was spreading itself, bidding high for an extension of the railroad. The rodeo would last three days. He would know pretty well how he stood by the end of the second day. If it looked bad, then there was the other thing. He'd go about it differently than that greenhorn had, with his black mask and his lack of judgment; the express stage was the one to tackle. It arrived at night, and sometimes carried a good deal of money.

Hunger is no respecter even of bitter thoughts. It attacked Jack savagely, after he had strolled aimlessly for what must have been a long time. Lucky, after all, that the hold-up had fluked it. He had enough money to buy what he needed for a day or so. But he didn't want company to-night, so he looked around for a quiet place to eat. It was quite dark by this time. But there, almost under his nose, was a small building with a sign—"Restaurant." It was lighted by flickering kerosene lamps, and the long counter was empty of customers. Jack entered uncertainly. Behind the counter stood the girl of the stage. Moreover, she recognized him and smiled.

"Come in," she invited. "Did you want something to eat?"

He nodded and straddled his long legs over one of the high stools. The girl disappeared through a door, to return in a moment, followed by the motherly looking woman, who had her hat off now to show soft white hair, and who wore an immense apron and a wide smile of welcome.

"You come right back here," said she firmly. "Young man, what do you mean by sneaking off that way?"

Jack looked at her and then at his feet. His hat was on one of the stools and he picked it up, but the white-haired woman grasped him firmly by the arm.

"Not again," she declared. "You come along with me."

Behind the door was the kitchen, a big room with a wide-topped stove, a full wood box, and a small square table at which two

chairs had been placed and on which the girl was deftly spreading a red and white table cloth. She smiled brightly at Jack, and he sat down suddenly in one of the chairs. Soon a plate, heaped high with ham and eggs, bread and butter, and fried potatoes, was placed before him. A steaming cup of coffee appeared at his elbow, and in the middle of the table the girl deposited a marvelous-appearing pie.

"I made it," she explained. "It's still warm."

She sat down across the table from him. At first he choked a bit, but hunger and the quality of the food had its effect. The pie proved to be even more marvelous than it looked.

"You were hungry," observed the girl smilingly, when at last he sighed, leaned back, and fumbled for the makings.

"I shore was," admitted Jack. "An' I hope to tell yuh I never had such grub as that before."

"Go ahead and smoke," she urged him, as he hesitated with the sack of tobacco in his fingers. "You came for the rodeo?"

The elderly woman was waiting on a late customer in the outer room, so they were alone for the moment. He nodded and lighted his smoke. It wasn't easy to talk to a woman, especially this one who attracted him so strongly. He looked up from a contemplation of the toe of his boot when the other woman came back, having disposed of the customer outside. Jack hoped the affair of the stage would not be mentioned. To avoid it he became suddenly very daring.

"There's a movie in town," he said to the girl. "Saw them fixin' the lights. Reckon yuh could get away for the second show? An' yore maw, too," he added hastily.

The girl smiled, and a bit of added color came to her cheeks.

"You haven't told me your name," she said. "Mine is Dora Carter. And this is my mother."

Jack flushed and stammered his name. For the moment his lean, deeply tanned face lost some of its tight-lipped grimness. The two women glanced at each other, and the older one spoke.

"You youngsters go along to the picture show. I'll keep open a while longer, and then go to bed. I'd much rather."

Outside again, under the starlit sky, they strolled slowly. Now and again the girl's fingers touched his arm. Once her thin scarf floated out on a bit of breeze and flicked his face like a caress. They talked disconnectedly, in odd embarrassment, until they reached the motion picture house. In the inner darkness they sat through a spectacle of love and passion in the upper circles, as imagined by a scenario writer who had only his imagination to draw upon. Once their hands touched, and Jack tingled to the tip ends of his hair. Then she dropped her scarf and they fumbled for it together, hand meeting hand again, breaths coming a little short, hearts throbbing a trifle fast. At the end of the show the cool night air was welcome.

"I'm glad to be here and not there," said Dora, referring to the picture. She looked up at the stars and drew a deep breath of the soft air.

"Yes," Jack agreed, looking at her face, blurred in the dim light, but more alluring than that of any girl he had ever known.

"I hope you have good luck to-morrow," she said after a moment. "I'll try to come and see you ride."

"I'm needing a bunch o' luck," he told her. And then, like a spring released, rushed out the thing that was crushing him and making him bitter.

"I've not ridden a bad hoss for two years Yuh see, I quit the game when Burt put it up to me. He's my pardner. We gambled all we had on our little ranch. Acres, but no stock or buildings. We put up a house of a sort, and strung wire. Got the start of a herd, too, this year. But it won't be worth nothin' for two years at least. Then Burt rid over to Reeve's place one day an' found him abusin' that gal he an' Miss' Reeve took from the orphanage in Denver. Burt must a got real peeved, 'cause he beat Reeve up kinda bad. Had it comin', Reeve did. He'd almost killed the gal. She's a mite—thirteen, she says, but looks less. An' next we know, Burt's in jail. Somebody has shot Reeve dead. They claim he had no enemies 'cept Burt, so Burt musta done

it. I know better, but that don't count. Me an' Burt wasn't together when it happened."

They had reached the now darkened building where the little restaurant was, and where Dora and her mother lived. The girl motioned him to sit beside her on the doorstep.

"That was hard luck," she said.

"There's more," Jack said grimly. "I went to Tucson next day to see Burt an' fix up to get a lawyer. Whilst I was there I found out the bank we'd put the rest of our roll in had gone bust. The lawyer wanted cash money. Five hundred dollars down, and five hundred more if he got Burt off. I went back, thinkin' I'd dope out somethin', and found our house gone. Fire cleaned it out. Only ashes when I got there. No chance to raise anything on that, yuh see. The land is mostly mortgaged already, an' the stock ain't all paid for. Meantime Burt's in jail, with the trial comin' along, an' he's got to have a lawyer somehow. I heard about this rodeo, an' the cash prizes. It looked like a chance. But I dunno. It's been two years, an' I never rated higher than third place, when I was ridin' 'em all."

He ended, feeling ashamed for having talked so much, yet relieved at having told someone the story. Dora laid her hand gently on his, and when he looked at her he saw that her eyes were glistening, the lashes wet. His throat closed so that he had to swallow hurriedly to keep from choking.

"I know you'll win," Dora said. "I'll pray for your good luck, Jack."

Afterwards he wondered how he had refrained from kissing her then, in spite of the fact that he did not know her very well. The fact that she was so interested, and cared that way, was great. Would she bring him luck? Some of the luck that had been illusive all these years? He went back to his hotel room with his fingers tingling from the pressure of hers, wondering again what would have happened if he had dared that kiss. But he wanted something more than just that, something of which he was only dimly aware as yet.

In the morning he went to see the horse he had drawn. In two years a new lot had come along, and he recognized only a few names.

"I'm ridin'," he told the man at the gate, showing his card.

"What did yuh draw?" asked the man.

"Methodist John," Jack said, and the man grinned.

"Better write yore folks, son. He's a killer, that haws."

Jack shrugged his shoulders and moved on. In the stall he saw the horse, a small, bullet-headed, Roman-nosed bay, with wild red-rimmed eyes. But he felt a bit of elation. Inquiry disclosed that his guess was right. He had ridden that horse before, under another name. A bad horse, true enough, but not unknown and hence not so much to be feared. That girl must be bringing him luck!

At noon he ate a small lunch and smoked several cigarettes, but he kept away from the little restaurant. Dora had said she would be on hand to see him ride, and that satisfied him. He would show her a ride, he vowed, with a grim smile.

It was late when his number was called. There had been some excellent rides, and the crowd was in good humor. A big crowd, too. He crawled into the saddle. They jerked off the blind. Earth, sky, staring faces, dust, sickening jolts, breath snapping whirls and twists. The horse had nothing new. Jack took it all, feeling that he was making a good ride. When they took him off, the crowd roared. A thrill swept over him. He hoped Dora was there to hear that cheer.

"That's ridin', boy!" one of the handlers told him.

Behind the stands he lay on his side, waiting for the blood to start running again in its proper channels, feeling very sick, very sore, but mighty happy. A good ride! Maybe his luck was changing. With half a chance, he'd show 'em!

That night he went to the restaurant for supper. The place was filled, but Dora let him in and took him out to the kitchen, where the small table was waiting. Her eyes were glowing and her cheeks flushed when she looked at him. Her mother beamed.

"I'm so glad!" said the girl. "I've heard about it. They are all talking about it. You made the best ride of the day!"

"Then yuh wasn't there," he said, disappointed.

"No, I couldn't go, after all. But I will be there to-morrow. And I just know you're coming out on top!"

After he had finished eating, he asked her when she would be through.

"Mebbe yuh might take a little walk," he suggested.

"You go right along now," urged Mrs. Carter. "The crowd is about gone. I can take care of the rest."

Jack strolled around outside, waiting. It was half an hour before she came, but he would have waited all night. They walked along the main street of Mesa. Everywhere he was recognized. It made him glow to hear his name mentioned, to be slapped on the back as he passed. But the girl was quiet. Once out of the crowd, however, her manner changed. They talked with the intimacy of old friends. She told him about herself and her mother, how their home had been in Mesa ever since she could remember, and how, after her father died, she and her mother ran the restaurant alone, holding on in hope that the railroad would come and they might sell out.

"But we've saved quite a bit, too," she said. "In a year or so we will be able to go to Los Angeles and open a tea room. I'd like that. This is pretty hard sometimes. You see, we have to go to Morton at least once a week to order things and bring out perishables. That's why we were on the stage yesterday."

He was glad she did not say more about the stage episode. They strolled and talked for a couple of hours, and then she insisted that he must go to bed so as to be ready for the next day's ride. He had drawn a horse named Dynamite, of which he knew nothing.

The next morning, according to Dora's wish, he went to the restaurant for breakfast, and found her waiting for him. The table in the kitchen was set for two. It gave him an odd feeling to sit there opposite her; a thrill that had with it a heart pang when he thought of not sitting there after this day and the next were gone. Or, he thought grimly, possibly not after this day.

Having to be in the ring between two and four in the afternoon, he spent the interval idling. It was good to roam around the town and find that he was already counted as one sure to be rated high. The best ride so far was to his credit. People he did not know talked to him like old friends. Girls giggled, stared, and tried to attract his attention; but they did not matter. Every time he thought of one girl he tingled. Every time he thought of Burt in jail down at Tucson the tingle left and grim determination gripped him. Old Burt! Must get him out of that mess—His eye caught sight of two armed men entering the bank down the street. Without conscious intent he walked that way. At the door of the bank a man spoke to him.

"Great ride you made, Jack. I'm backin' you to win. Got fifty bucks on you."

"Do my best," Jack said quietly.

"I know it," said the man, looking at him curiously yet with respect. Most of the riders when they had made a good showing, bragged of it. "Going into the bank? I'll introduce you, if you like. They're holding the cash prizes you're riding for."

Jack nodded and followed the man inside, where he shook hands with the president of the bank and the cashier, each of whom said they had seen him ride and wished him luck on through. The two armed men were sitting inside the door, and Jack mentioned the fact.

"Afraid of a hold-up?" he smiled.

"Not that," the cashier told him. "We're sending a big payroll to the mines in the Paint Hill country to-night. Those chaps are special guards, in case of accident."

Afterwards Jack turned over in his mind this bit of information. There would be a large sum of money in care of those guards that night. Well, the day would tell what that fact might mean to him. He put it out of his mind and went to the arena.

The crowd was even larger than it had been on the opening day. Jack listened to them cheer, and wondered where Dora

would be sitting. Then he went to have a look at the horse he was to ride. Dynamite was a roan with a mean eye and cut knees that told their own story. Jack looked over his saddle and saw to the way it was cinched on the roan, meantime studying the animal and wondering. A good start was to his credit, but he had to make a good showing to-day in order to count in the running. That meant two things: the horse had to be good, and he had to be better. When he swung into the saddle and stuck his feet into the stirrups his face was grim. The jolting he had received yesterday had left him sore and bruised; even the stirrup irons hurt his feet.

The blind was off! The roan reared and lunged out into the arena. The crowd roared. Jack felt a wave of nausea, felt the blood whipped from his heart, felt his spine snap. Then suddenly the flat-eared head of the horse went down. Jack felt himself surge skyward almost irresistibly. That was a bad trick, that nose diving! His knees jerked in on the roan's ribs with a force that brought a grunt from the brute. Twice more the horse tried that dirt-digging dive, but now Jack was on guard. Then the beast went into a veritable paroxysm of pitching. Blood dripped from Jack's nose. He no longer saw or heard the crowd. Then strong arms lifted him off the horse. The ride was over.

"Did I show sky that first time?" he gasped.

The handler who was holding him looked grave.

"Dunno what the judges'll say, fella. Yuh shore made a he-wind up."

But despair was in Jack's heart as he lay on his side back of the sands, waiting for his nose to stop bleeding and for his circulation to start once more. A good ride, but not as good as it should have been. He heard the crowd cheer Nevins—Slim Nevins, who had won at Cheyenne a month ago. Nevins had had a bit of hard luck in the horse he drew yesterday. To-day he apparently was in luck.

"Some ride!" said a man passing by. "That'll put Nevins up ahead. Baird showed a bit of sky, the judges say. Too bad, but that Nevins feller is a rider!"

Later Jack went around to see how he stood. Not out of it, they told him, but it had been a close call. They gave him another chance, riding Undertaker to-morrow. Nevins was to ride another bad one, but he had the edge now to win first place, and Jack found himself listed to bid for second against Bill Badger.

"Same old stuff," he told himself bitterly. "An' I thought I was in for a run o' luck!"

Nevertheless, he had to see Dora once more, and went to the restaurant for supper. She came and sat at the table with him, talking. Her mother had not been feeling well that day, so she had not gone to see him ride. But she had heard about it.

"It just means that your luck slipped a little," she said cheerfully. "To-morrow it will be back again strong!"

Jack was skeptical, but said nothing of it.

"Can yuh get out for a bit of a walk to-night?" he asked.

She hesitated. She had engaged a woman to help serve and cook in her mother's place, but she didn't like to leave that woman in full charge with so many customers to handle. Jack's heart sank to his boots. But then unexpectedly Mrs. Carter appeared. Her headache, she said, was much better.

"I'm feeling pretty good now," she said. "Dora, you run along for a breath of air with Jack. I'll let Mrs. Homer do the work, and just sit here comfortable. You've been cooped up all day. Do go."

The girl assented quickly. When they passed the livery stable, on the opposite side of the street, Jack saw a buckboard being hitched. Farther on they passed the bank, where there were lights and men passing to and fro. They went on, turned and again passed the bank, strolling slowly. Dora exclaimed suddenly.

"Oh! When I went to the post office to-day they gave me a letter for you. It's at the restaurant. I almost forgot it."

Jack's smile was crooked, and he experienced a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. There was only one person from whom he might get a letter. He

ripped open the envelope and read the contents at a glance.

"From Burt," he said briefly. "His case has been shoved ahead. Comes to trial next Monday."

Dora looked at him sympathetically. "But you will win to-morrow, Jack, and then you can get that lawyer."

He shook his head despondently. It was a chance, with the odds against him, and the time was very short to try anything else. The prize for second place, even if he could win it, wasn't enough. He'd have to beat Nevins.

"Let's walk a little more," suggested the girl.

"This has got to be thought out," he answered grimly. "Mebbe I better go alone an' tackle it."

She did not misunderstand. "All right, Jack. But I'll wait up until you come to say good-night."

Now what, he wondered, did she mean by that?

"It may be pretty late," he said.

"I'll wait. Please come."

With that she went into the restaurant, and he turned away. At the hotel he got his gun from his blanket roll, and put it under his coat, thrust in between pants and belt. Then he went out and walked through the town again, passing the bank. The buckboard was standing outside. The fact irritated him. Why were they so slow? If they had gone, it would be settled. Well, it was settled anyhow. He went on, following the road north until he came to the spot he had in mind. There he waited. His plan was simple. He'd bind and gag the men and make his escape in the buckboard.

After a time he heard the sound of trotting horses. He drew his gun from under his coat and got to his feet. There was no need for a mask, he thought grimly. Then he saw a shadow that moved. It came towards him, a shape unmistakable even in the darkness. The buckboard was not yet in sight.

"Jack, I've come to help you! See, I have a gun. It's a job for two, isn't it?"

"Dora! Why did yuh follow me?"

"You need my help, Jack," she said.

He peered at her through the darkness. She had put some dark thing over her light dress, and wore a man's hat. In her hand he saw a long-barreled gun, probably her father's. A lump rose in his throat. His thoughts went wild. Burt in jail—the money in the buckboard—the lawyer and five hundred dollars—Dora—

"Here it comes, Jack! Ready!"

Slowly, as if it weighed heavily, he raised his arm. His hand fell on her shoulder and drew her back. She faced him. Their eyes clung together. The buckboard rolled nearer, rolled past them, was gone in the night. The girl sobbed.

"Did yuh think I'd let yuh in for that sort o' thing?" demanded Jack sternly. "Not even for Burt!"

But when he had left her and gone to his room at the hotel his mind was full of torment. He had proved a traitor to Burt. He'd thrown down his pal when he was needed most! Throwing his gun on the bed he swore savagely. Damn women!

It was dawn before he slept, and he stayed in bed until noon. He was tired and sore in every nerve and muscle, weary and sick in mind. But that something in him which had been perceived at the first by Dora and her mother made him set his jaw and tighten his lips and get ready for the last ride.

On his way to the arena it was necessary to pass the restaurant. Dora was watching for him. She was going to see him ride, she told him gravely. He pondered upon it in grim silence. How might her presence affect his luck? He said very little, but walked with her to the gate and saw her enter the stands.

Undertaker, the horse he had drawn, was a buckskin with white eyes that batted sleepily. He stood quiet as a kitten while they threw the saddle on and cinched it.

"He's allus that way when he's due tuh raise hell," said one of the handlers knowingly. Then he glanced at Jack and closed his mouth tightly.

Jack shrugged his shoulders with an indifference that was not feigned.

"Hope he raises plenty to-day," he said grimly.

When he climbed into the saddle the

crowd was roaring at the speech of the announcer.

"This young man, Baird, is in for a rough time, folks! He's showed plenty o' class, but Undertaker is the right name for the horse he's forkin' now! Here he comes!"

With the blind off, the buckskin stood for a few seconds, then shot out into the ring. Jack saw the sea of expectant faces whirl around him, saw the savage head of the horse duck down, jambed his knees in with all his strength. The horse squealed and bit at his leg. Jack swung his toe just in time to catch the little brute on the nose. Then the fight was on. The buckskin nearly tore himself in two. Jack's spine jerked and snapped. His head spun dizzily; there was a roaring in his ears. The horse began to pitch fence cornered, then ornamented this with sunfishing of a particularly efficient variety. He left the ground headed one way, and after a tremendous convulsion of his whole body, came down stiff-legged, heading in another direction altogether. Next he swapped ends, and then with a wild scream of rage, reared up and back, throwing himself clean. Jack left the saddle at the last instant and jerked himself to the side. The little horse landed with a thud, turned and scrambled to its feet. Jack was in the saddle as it got upright. The crowd was roaring deafeningly. The handlers in the ring were endeavoring to get close enough to take Jack off. But Jack didn't see or hear. It was a fight to the death between himself and that buckskin devil.

For the second time the little horse reared for the backward fall. This time Jack was prepared. Having no loaded quirt, he brought his clenched fist down between the brute's ears with all his strength. The horse went forward instead of backward, shook his head, and quit cold!

"Baird! Baird! Baird!" The crowd was howling with excitement.

One of the handlers lifted Jack bodily from the saddle.

"Boy, that was a ride!"

Jack gulped, and drew the back of his hand across his eyes.

"How will they rate me?" he gasped weakly.

"By jinks," cried the excited man, "if they rate yuh lower than six feet above the top I'm for lynchin' them judges!"

The crowd now was chanting Jack's name. But he suddenly keeled over and two of the handlers carried him back of the stands.

When he opened his eyes and looked up from the cot where he lay, he saw Dora standing there, white of face, with horror-filled eyes.

"Oh, how terrible!" she sobbed. "Jack dear, are you going to—to be all right—again?"

"Shore," he panted, trying to smile. "Looks worse'n it is."

From somewhere she got a basin of water and towels, and bathed his head and face, washing off the blood and dirt. Gradually, as he lay there with closed eyes, soothed by her gentle hands, the roaring died in his ears, the blood began to run where it should. But he felt tremendously tired, and opened his eyes only when he heard someone speak to Dora and heard her reply.

"A telegram for you, Jack," she said a moment later, kneeling beside him.

"Read it," he asked her.

She tore open the envelope and read aloud in a choking voice the message:

"Good boy, Jack. All O. K. this end. Mother Reeve confessed. Shot old man when he attacked her and girl. Best of luck.

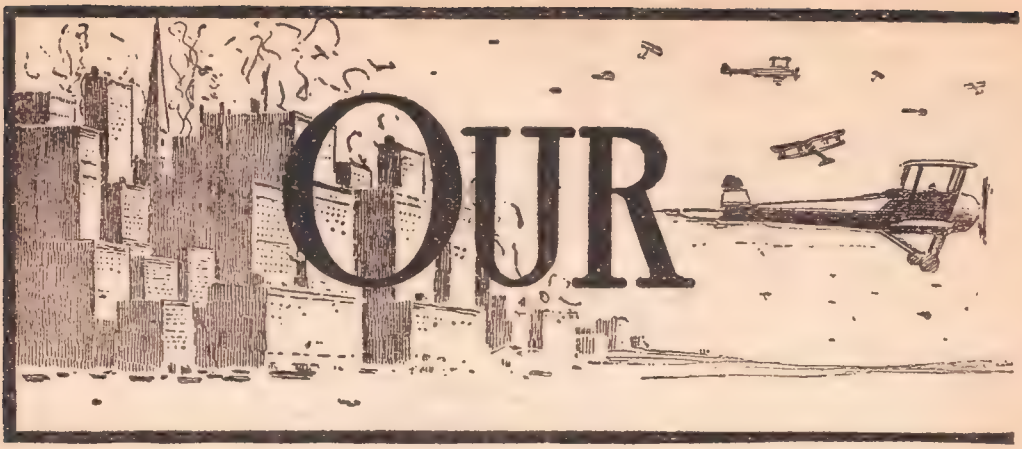
BURT."

There was a short silence as Jack tried to grasp the meaning of it. Then, with a great effort, he sat up. Dora leaned away suddenly, her cheeks crimson. But he reached out his arms and held her.

"Yuh brought me the first real luck I ever had, gal," he said softly. "Will yuh give me my luck—for always?"

"Just luck, Jack?" she asked, holding back from him.

He smiled crookedly. "If yuh knew how much I've wanted to kiss them lips o' yourn, honey, yuh'd know that it's love that's brought me luck."



OUR AIR MAIL is running daily between the editorial office of RANCH ROMANCES and its readers throughout the world. The Editor wishes to establish a definite understanding with every reader and be in a position to know just what you want and why. RANCH ROMANCES is not published for any one but the reader, and we want you to look upon this magazine as something distinctly your own. Take a personal interest in its future. Write and tell us exactly the kind of story that you think ought to go into it. Also we want to help make friends for our readers. We want to help you to know friends who are thousands of miles away or within a stone's throw of your own town. OUR AIR MAIL will be glad to forward and exchange letters. The Editor reserves the right to read and turn over to the Postal Authorities, if necessary, anything that is not in keeping with the clean, outdoor spirit of RANCH ROMANCES. Be sure to enclose postage for letters sent by OUR AIR MAIL.

PALS OF THE DEEP BLUE SEA

Dear Editor:

Would like to know if you would enter two lonesome pals into your "Air Mail." Would like to hear from pen pals, especially Dolly and Florence of Wenatchee, Wash., whose letter appeared in second March number.

We were both very much interested in "The Wandering Heart" and "Tim Bucked Two," and think there should be more like them.

It is very hard for us to get "R. R.," as most of our time is spent at sea, but upon arrival at any port we try to get all back numbers we have missed.

We were both born in Paducah, Texas. Although we don't know so much about punching cows, we know a lot about the West, having been as far west as Australia, and man! there are some cattle ranches there!

One of us has blond hair, blue eyes, is five feet eight tall, weighs 150 pounds; the other has chestnut hair, gray eyes, is five foot ten, weighs 160 pounds. Wish you much success in the future.

HUGHIE AND JACK.

New York City, N. Y.

FROM A SURE-FIRE RAMBLER

Dear Editor:

Just wanted to let you know you sure have got a sure-fire magazine.

I have been a constant reader of "R. R." for the last two years. To be exact, whenever I got a hold of it, for I'm a sure-fire rambler.

I'm twenty-one years of age, have dark brown hair and also dark brown eyes. I am five feet eight and a half inches tall, weigh 167 pounds.

Have traveled from the Yukon to the Rio. Would like to correspond with some girls about my own age.

Hoping "R. R." lives forever, I remain,

Detroit, Mich. *HAROLD.*

LONELY SOLDIER

Dear Editor:

Just a lonely young soldier looking for all pen pals, yea, verily I am. I have been reading your magazine for over a year, but this is the first time I have written to you, and I sure would love to join your "Air Mail."

Would you please forward the enclosed letters and do a lonely soldier boy a favor?

Wishing you every success possible, I remain,

A LONELY SOLDIER.

Ft. Ethan Allen, Vt.

READS "R. R." TO CHASE THE BLUES AWAY

Dear Editor:

So far I have only read two issues of "R. R." and I surely do enjoy them, and if I am allowed to use slang, they are quite the "cat's whiskers." When I get the blues (which is quite often) I grab myself a "Ranch Romances" and hide off in some corner and read a few of these stories. They sure could cheer most anyone out of the "grumps." In the last issue I sure got quite a laugh out of "The Woeful Watsons." This sure runs true to life and the story reminded me so much of the neighbors next door, I sent them a copy of "Ranch Romances," hoping they would recognize a description of a family like their own.

"Ranch Romances" is published just enough. If it came every week we wouldn't have time to read all the stories. These stories are the cleanest, most wholehearted, and best written stories of any magazine I know, and I surely enjoy reading them.

I am a high school girl—a senior—am eighteen years old, and five feet tall, blue eyes, curly black hair, and love the out-of-doors, although I'm not a cowgirl. I would like to join the "Air Mail" and hear from the boys and girls in other States. I will surely answer the letters I receive.

I remain a steadfast reader and booster of "Ranch Romances."

Olympia, Wash. *C. V. C.*

FROM U. S. S. ARIZONA

Dear Editor:

I am a regular reader of "Ranch Romances" and would like to get in the ranks of "Our Air Mail" gang.

I like your magazine very much and hardly ever miss a copy, although as we move around so much it is hard to get it some times, especially in foreign countries. I was born in Idaho and have spent most of my life on Western ranches and so can sure appreciate your wonderful stories of the West. I am a Pharmacist's Mate, 1st class, on one of Uncle Sam's largest warships, and so travel about quite a bit. We are due in New York City shortly, and as it is my first visit to the biggest city in the world, I am looking forward to taking in the sights. I would be glad to correspond with any boys or girls of "Our Air Mail" pals that would wish to hear from a Western boy.

I am enclosing a letter to one that I would like for you to forward via "Our Air Mail."

Yours truly,

THEODORE DE CARRICO.

Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

ALWAYS HAS A SMILE

Dear Editor:

Have just read my first "Ranch Romances" magazine. It can't be beat. I have read a great many other magazines, but "R. R." takes the prize. From now on it will be "Ranch Romances" for this boy. I am seventeen, grey eyes, dark brown hair, five feet eight, heavy set and have always a smile.

I would love to hear from all. Now please write to—

Your friend,

Mexico, Mo. *CARL.*

A MARINE, CHINA BOUND

Dear Editor:

I've finally met "R. R." and would like to meet and shake hands with the authors and editors of such a clean outdoor magazine.

I'm just a marine in a rather large marine corps, and I get real lonesome sometimes for someone to write to. Your age doesn't count, but I am twenty-four. I'm five feet eleven, and have hazel eyes.

China is staring me in the eyes just now. We are preparing for the trip over.

Say, editor, tell someone to write, will you?

San Diego, Cal. TED.

GETS PRETTY LONESOME ON THE OLD RANCH

Dear Editor:

I just got hold of a copy of your January issue of "Ranch Romances" and have read through each story carefully. Let me congratulate you on the type of story that you are putting out in it. It is the first issue that I have read and the whole thing is mighty interesting to one living in the country about which the stories deal and seeing how really true to life they are. I hope that I may get more of them.

I am enclosing a few letters that I hope that you will forward for me to some of the writers in "Our Air Mail." It gets pretty lonesome on the old ranch now and then, and a few pen pals would help out quite a bit and will help you to learn things about other parts of the country too. This is a real service. Thanks.

Very truly yours,

Corvallis, Ore. ROBERT.

CHILDREN OF ERIN

Dear Editor:

Top of the mornin' to ye. We're two Irish lassies, come to offer ye the word o' congratulation on the good stories ye print in "Ranch Romances." Begorra, 'tis a great buik indade, an' many's the toime we injoyed it. It's iviry wake ye should print it thin, an' we wouldn't have to wait so long before gettin' a new copy.

We'd loike verra much to jine the "Air Mail" if we cud be allowed to do so. What we want is to meet some o' our own counthrymen an' counthrywomen.

I s'pose ye're wondtherin' what we're loike. Well, thin, one av us is light haired with blue-gray eyes, and nineteen years old, an' the other is eighteen, dark brown hair an' brown eyes. We're both around five feet five in height. We loike music an' dancin' and lots o' things that's nice. If there's any Celts that are newcomers in this great land, why, thin, we'll be verra glad to show thim around and make thim acquainted with lots av their own kind.

We call oursel's twins, cuz our thots an' loikes is so much aloike, an' we be all the toime a-thryin' to plase each other.

We are na sisters, but verra guid pals, an' wouldna' part for anythin'. We will appreciate it verra much if you will print our letther as soon as possible, an' it's waitin' with eager moinds we'll be to see it in lovely buik.

We hope, verra much indade, that "Ranch Romances" will always continue to be printed. As fer betther sthories, arrah, there couldn't be anythin' betther. An' we knows sthories, too.

We hope we will get lots av letthers right soon. Address thim to the

CHILDREN OF ERIN.

Jersey City, N. J.

A CIRCUS TROUPER

Dear Editor:

I have been a constant reader of your very excellent magazine for quite some time and feel that along with the many others who are constant readers, I would like to compliment you on your efforts for good, clean, wholesome entertainment.

It has been my fortune to roam this old world of ours for some ten years, and must say that for relaxation I enjoy an hour with "Ranch Romances" more than twice that time with most of the other periodicals that I am accustomed to read.

I am soon to go on the road for another season under the "White Tops" and would enjoy hearing from any who would care to correspond with

Edgeley, N. Dak. "A CIRCUS TROUPER."

WE NEVER SAY "NO" TO READERS

Dear Editor:

I cannot resist the temptation to write you any longer. For some time I have been reading the Double R. and think it gives me more pleasure than any reading material I ever picked up.

I want all you readers to share my happiness, so I am going to tell you a secret. I'm in love! But say, I forgot to tell you what I am in love with. Well folks, it's the Double R., and I wager I'm not by myself. I would like to join the "Air Mail." Please don't say no!

Inclosed you will find a letter to Albert Nelson of Hawaii, which I wish you would please forward. Would like to hear from Lonesome Kid, Walter, and Big Tex.

A sincere reader,

West Huntsville, Ala. TOODLES.

WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM ALL THE IRISH LASSIES IN THE U. S.!

Dear Editor:

I wish to congratulate you on the most wonderful Western magazine published. It certainly is great. Little "Scarum" is a wonder! I hope we will have a lot of her stories. I have been reading "Ranch Romances" for a year now, and never fail to get a copy. It should be printed every week.

I'm a Celtic lass and wish to join your "Air Mail." I am eighteen and a Catholic. I would like to hear from all the Irish girls in the U. S. Quite a large order I know, and on second thought I'd be satisfied with hearing from one-fourth of all that number. I would also like to correspond with girls living on the dear ould sod. If there are any interested lassies in New York, Jersey, or anywheres around, who would like to meet me, I would be very glad to become acquainted with them and make them my friends. Greenhorns will find in me an amiable companion. This applies also to narrowbacks.

Also, I am not averse to corresponding with or meeting those commonly known as the "strong" sex, providing they are good sports, and over twenty years of age.

Come on, now, all you Celts, pick up your pens and let me see how many Irish there are this side of the ocean.

Wishing "Ranch Romances" heaps an' heaps of success, I am

Yours sincerely,

New York, N. Y. "COLLEEN."

SMILES FROM NORTH DAKOTA

Dear Editor:

I got a hold of a "Ranch Romances" last week and read it. I think it is one of the best magazines I ever read and can hardly wait for the next one. This magazine ought to be published every week. I liked the novel, "A Six-Gun Courtship."

I would like to join your "Air Mail." I would like to hear from both girls and boys from all over. I promise to answer every letter I get.

I am twenty-one, have brown eyes, dark brown curly hair, and am five feet eleven inches tall. I get pretty lonesome here and would like to have many pen pals.

From now on you can count me as one of your regular readers, for I would not miss a copy of this magazine if I had to walk ten miles to get it.

I am sending you a letter to forward.

Yours very truly,

Grand Forks, N. Dak. *SMILES.*

ONLY A GOB

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading the last issue of "Ranch Romances" and I think it is the best book of its kind that is sold. According to some of the letters I read in the last copy, everyone is in favor of it being printed at least twice-a-month.

I am a radio operator in the U. S. Navy and I certainly would like to hear from some pen pals, girls preferred.

I like the "Air Mail" department, too, as it gives a fellow a chance to make many good friends.

I am five feet eight inches tall, have brown hair and brown eyes. I have two hobbies, one is reading books like "R. R." and the other one is "Brass Pounding." I certainly will welcome letters from anyone at any time.

Hoping to hear from all of you, and thanking you in anticipation, I remain,

Yours,

Hampton Roads, Virginia. *"ONLY A GOB."*

FIRST THING IS "OUR AIR MAIL"

Dear Editor:

Began reading your magazine through curiosity. You see my younger sister reads it and I really wanted to know why she was so enthusiastic over the stories.

Perhaps because I write stories myself, I am a bit critical of them, especially the "Westerns." However, I have found your stories quite the thing in Westerns.

But the first thing I turn to is "Our Air Mail." I find great enjoyment in reading letters from interested readers all over the world.

I would love to correspond with some of those readers, especially if he sees this, Stanley of Wiltshire, England. I imagine he could enlighten a girl not yet twenty on some subjects of England that she is interested in.

Hoping this letter is not too long to find space in a future issue of your magazine and that said magazine will be honored with more wonderful stories of the great outdoors,

Chicago, Ill. *ISABELLA.*

LONESOME FROM NEW JERSEY

Dear Editor:

You may think me a bore for writing again, but I must simply do it.

I'm sending in my ballot for the second number of April issue and hope I wrote it out good.

I want to thank you for your letter you sent me. I thank you for that very much.

I'd like to know if you have a little bit of space in "Our Air Mail" for me. It's just one month since I have moved from New York and now we live in a town, so you see I'm very lonesome.

Just finished reading the second April number of "Ranch Romances" and hope to keep on reading your wonderful mag. as long as it's published. The first thing I read is "Our Air Mail," and it certainly has started me writing. I enjoyed every story and only wish we could have "R. R." out twice a week.

I hope this letter won't be too long and hope it makes me a member of "Our Air Mail" too.

I am seventeen, have brown bobbed hair, blue eyes. Would like to hear from some real lonesome cowboy like myself. And would also answer all letters from anyone who cares to write. This is hoping "Buck of Canada" sees this.

Please won't some cowboy forget his work for one minute and send me a line?

Hoping to get lots of letters so I won't have to bother you again.

Wishing you and "R. R." continued success,

LONESOME ANNA.

Newark, N. J.

"SCARUM" IS A FAVORITE

Dear Editor:

Gee! What a wonderful book "R. R." is. I never read such a good book. The stories are just the kind I like to read. Especially "Scarum" and "Romeo Simpson's Courtship."

I have always wanted to go West, but don't think I will ever get there. I would like to write to some boys and girls between the ages of fourteen and sixteen who live on ranches.

I have dark brown hair and grey eyes. So if anyone wants to write to me, don't be afraid, as I will answer all letters I receive.

Wishing "R. R." the best of luck, I remain,

ESTHER.

East Munising, Mich.

TWO OLD-FASHIONED GIRLS

Dear Editor:

We are just two old-fashioned girls around the age of eighteen, who would like to join the "Air Mail" and express our deep appreciation of the most wonderful magazine, "Ranch Romances."

One of us is sending a letter to W. A. Williams of Welty, Okla., which we hope you will kindly forward.

Hoping this letter survives the waste basket and appears in the "Air Mail," we are forever your "Fans"

DORIS AND VAL.

Sacramento, Calif.

FROM THE FAMILY CIRCLE

Hello Everybody!

Although I have been a constant reader of "R. R." for the past year I am just making my debut as it were on this delightful page "Our Air Mail."

I spend many very enjoyable evenings in my room in the hotel reading the good clean stories in "R. R.," and I think our editor deserves much credit for her selections of wholesome stories which she puts in our magazine. I say our magazine, for I feel we are all one big family, us "R. R." readers, and it is OUR magazine.

I like the spirit our editor shows in trying to please her big family of readers and I am sure there is many a lasting friendship formed through the "Air Mail."

I am not too tall nor too small, and would love to correspond with you, one and all.

Yours for success for our dear old magazine,

S. C. SLETE.

Burke, Idaho.

STATION B-E-A-V-E-R BROADCASTING

Dear Editor:

Station B-E-A-V-E-R is now broadcasting. The Sunshine Girl is now speaking. I think "Ranch Romances" is as welcome as the flowers in May. I am a new reader, and the only thing that I regret is that I haven't been reading this extraordinary magazine for years.

I live in Saints Rest, away out in the beautiful little town of Beaver, Pennsylvania.

I would like to join the "Air Mail," because I think it is a wonderful way to make friends. I would be very glad to correspond with young men from any locality, especially the West.

My hobbies are dancing, skating, and all outdoor sports.

I am nineteen years of age and a High School graduate. I am brunette with dreamy blue-grey eyes, and considered very good-looking.

I can play the piano, and am quite an accomplished vocalist.

I can tickle the keys of a typewriter and would answer all letters with great pleasure.

Thanking you and wishing "R. R." the greatest success, I remain,

Sincerely,

Beaver, Penn. *LUDAVA.*

TAKES "R. R." BRAND

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of "Ranch Romances" for some time and have been deeply interested in both the stories and the "Air Mail" idea, but this is the first time that I have found courage enough to write.

I like "R. R." better every time I have a chance to read it and I just wanted to tell you that I am willing to submit to the "R. R." branding-iron and I will be more than glad to bear it.

I will be glad to hear from any of the readers of the magazine, especially those of the West (some lonesome cowpunchers) and any others that would care to write. Remember, I invite all of you.

Yours for a bright future for "R. R.,"

Dawson, Iowa. *RAYMOND.*

CALIFORNIA WELL-WISHER

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading the first issue of the April "R. R." and I just had to write and let you know that I enjoy reading "Ranch Romances."

I am sixteen years old, have dark hair and eyes.

I would like to hear from some of the girl readers that are around my age.

Wishing "Ranch Romances" the best of luck, I remain,

Very truly yours,

Stockton, Calif. *RAY.*

HAS ROAMED THE STATES, CANADA AND MEXICO

Dear Editor:

You and your staff have placed all your readers under obligation to you. You have always given us fine, clean stories of spirit and adventure. So I think it's time I thanked you for the many pleasant evenings I enjoyed during the past winter. Evenings which would have been very dull otherwise, were made very pleasant. I am all alone in Detroit, "The Dynamic City," and your magazine has been my pal for the past six or seven months.

I have roamed through the entire forty-eight states with Canada and Mexico thrown in. If any of your readers would care to hear of the sights I've seen and the things I've done, I would be very glad to oblige them.

I am only twenty-two years of age and I still revel in single blessedness (I hope I always shall). I am naturally a friendly "cuss" and I'd like to make a few pen pals.

I thank you again for the stories you have given us—and extend the hand of friendship to all your readers, wherever they may be.

Detroit, Mich. *"ROAMER."*

WOULD BE LOST WITHOUT "R. R."

Dear Editor:

I have not been a constant reader of "Ranch Romances," because I never heard of the magazine until two weeks ago. I was wishing for something nice to read, so the clerk in the stationery store suggested "Ranch Romances." He said it was a very good magazine and I find that he is right. I mean to have one of every issue published from now on.

It sure is wonderful that we are able to gain friends through it. I was most impressed with "Mr. P. Maibauner's" letter, found in the May issue, the first number. Will you please forward the enclosed letter to him? Thank you very much.

I would be so glad if I could receive letters from others, too.

Don't stop publishing the magazine, dear Editor. We should all be lost without it.

Sincerely yours,

Hollis, L. I. *DORIS.*

INDIANA READER

Dear Editor:

Just a few lines to tell how much I like your magazine.

I wrote to the editor before and I did not get an answer, so I will write again hoping to get better results this time. "Cowboy" and "R. R." are the best magazines I have ever read. You get a good thrill when you read these books. I could read 'em day and night if I had 'em.

I wish you could get me some pen pals. I love lots and lots of letters. I am six feet tall, weigh one-seventy pounds, have blond hair and brown eyes, and I am twenty-one years old. I give you permission to put this letter in the "Air Mail."

I wish you more and more success. I remain,

Your constant reader,

GEORGE.

Indianapolis, Indiana.

NEVADA NEWCOMER

Dear Editor:

I am a newcomer to "Our Air Mail," but really had to let you know what a real magazine you are turning out twice-a-month. I have read it for about a year, and the more I read it, the better I like it.

I would like pen pals from most anywhere, especially Texas, my old home State.

I am twenty-one years old.

I am enclosing a letter to Billie, of Duluth, Minnesota, which I would like you to forward.

Hoping your magazine continues its good stories,

I remain,

A NEVADA SON.

McGill, Nevada.

NOTHING'S TOO MUCH BOTHER, ANNA

Dear Editor:

I hope this isn't too much bother. But to-day on looking through "Our Air Mail" I found just the right pen pal I'd like to know.

He is just as lonesome as I am, so you see I think we will become good pals.

If this isn't too much bother, won't you please address the enclosed letter to Ernest, Fort Logan, Montana, in the 1st May number of "R. R."

This is enough, because I have written so many times before in praise of the most wonderful magazine on the market.

Enjoy reading every story, especially "The Pioneer Heart" by Frank C. Robertson.

Hope we could possibly have it once a day.

Wishing you and Double R. continued luck and success for 1927, I remain

A sincere reader,

Newark, N. J. *ANNA.*

BLUE EYES OF ARKANSAS

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading one of your wonderful magazines, called "Ranch Romances." It certainly is a wonder. There isn't any other magazine I know of that I enjoy reading as much as I do "R. R."

I think "Boots" was a real good story. I cannot remember the author as it was published quite awhile ago. "Fair, Fat and Forty," by Estrella Warde, was also a very interesting story.

Gee, but I would love to hear from a "real Westerner." Hope some lonesome cowboy sees this and is so kind as to write. I would also love to hear from anyone who wishes to write, and will gladly answer all letters received.

I am five feet, three and one-half inches tall, and weigh about one hundred twenty pounds. I am blond. Dark blue eyes and fair complexion.

Very sincerely,

Manila, Ark. *BLUE EYES.*

EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD PALS

Dear Editor and Friends:

We wish to express our appreciation for such a wonderful magazine as "R. R." We have only read one issue, but it has convinced us that there is none better and few equal.

We are eighteen years of age and would like some pen pals, so everyone who sees this, if it makes its way into the "Air Mail," sit down and write a long letter. We are fellows that love company and a roaring good time, so PLEASE write.

Wishing you all the success in the world, we remain "R. R." friends,

Yours truly,

OMER AND HIS PAL.

Indianapolis, Ind.

NEW READER WANTS PEN PALS

Dear Editor:

Have just completed my first "R. R." magazine and am anxious for another one. I like the stories just fine and am wishing you much success.

I'm also interested in your "Air Mail" and would appreciate it if you'd forward the enclosed letter to "Blackie," of Raleigh, N. C.—the lonely North Carolina girl.

Thanking you in advance for your favor, I remain,

Yours sincerely,

"JACK" KING.

Chapel Hill, N. C.

P. S.—Would be glad to hear from a few pen pals—please send some down this way. *J. K.*

ALWAYS HANKERED TO KNOW A REAL COWBOY

Dear Editor:

Here's one more who cannot find words to express her feelings towards "R. R." The stories are exceptional. Also your "Air Mail."

I am here to add one more letter or request. All my life I've been hankering to know a real live cowboy, so if one (or as many as can find paper) will write, well—sure enough I'll be in the seventh heaven.

I am seventeen years old, have brown hair and hazel eyes and just brimming over with a desire to answer any letters that may come my way. Please write, everyone, and let me know you're alive and kicking.

Wishing "R. R." and its editor the best of luck,

Yours sincerely,

OH MIN!

Ontario, Canada.

Whom Shall I Marry?

By PROFESSOR MARCUS MARI

JULY

CANCER

CANCER rules until July twenty-second. These people are active and cheerful during the day, but become depressed and restless at night, and seek forgetfulness and diversion in excitement.

They are fond of novels and history, and they are inclined to have far more respect for the past than for the present or future. In religion they are inclined to insist on adherence to the strictest orthodox belief. They are never in favor of radical change in either church or political party, and they are very positive in their opinions, and maintain them against all persuasion or argument.

They do not like to be hampered or dictated to in their work, but they are just and discreetly generous to others.

They are fond of travel, and, when this desire cannot be gratified, they make frequent changes in their occupation.

In business, they will find association with Gemini or Leo pleasant and profitable. They will find congenial mates and friends under the signs of Leo, Scorpio, and Pisces.

Professor Mari will give a personal reading to any of our readers who wish to fill out the coupon.

Name .....Sex.....

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Exact date of birth: Year.....Month.....Date.....

Always use this coupon and enclose stamped envelope. R. R. 7-10-27

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And now it is avoidable

PUT it up to yourself: could you honestly be attracted for any length of time to a person who had a case of loose dandruff?

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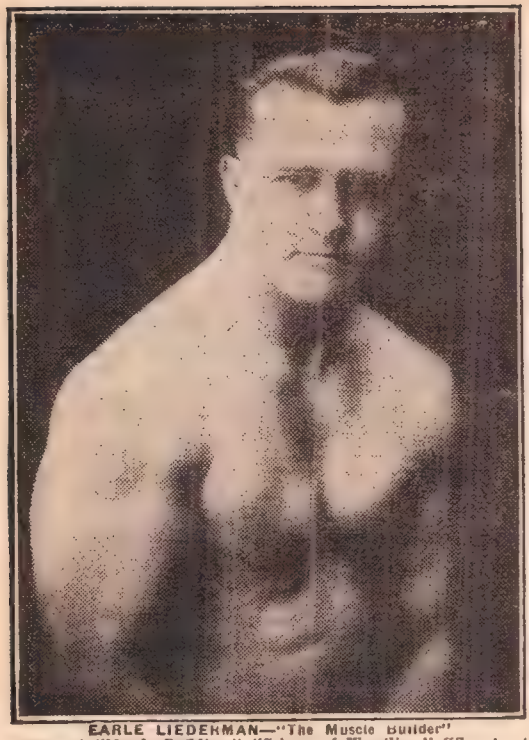

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THERE'S a devil inside of you. He's trying to kill you. Look out for him. He tells you not to work so hard. What's the use? The boss only piles more work on you. He tells you not to bother with your body. If you're weak—you always will be weak. Exercise is just a lot of rot. Do you recognize him? Of course you do. He's in us all. He's a murderer of ambition. He's a liar and a fool. **Kill him!** If you don't, he will kill you.

Saved

Thank your lucky stars you have another man inside of you. He's the human dynamo. He fills you full of pep and ambition. He keeps you alive—on fire. He urges you on in your daily tasks. He makes you strive for bigger and better things to do. He makes you crave for life and strength. He teaches you that the weak fall by the wayside, but the strong succeed. He shows you that exercise builds live tissue—live tissue is muscle—muscle means strength—strength is power. Power brings success! That's what you want, and gosh darn your old hide! You're going to get it.

Which Man Will It Be?

It's up to you. Set your own future. You want to be the Human Dynamo? Fine! Well, let's get busy. That's where I come in. That's my job. Here's what I'll do for you:

In just 30 days I'll increase your arm one full inch with real live, animated muscle. Yes, and I'll add two inches to your chest in the same time. Pretty good, eh? That's nothing. Now come the works. I'll build up your shoulders. I'll deepen your chest. I'll strengthen your whole body. I'll give you arms and legs like pillars. I'll literally pack muscle up your stomach and down your back. Meanwhile I'll work on those inner muscles surrounding your vital organs. You'll feel the thrill of life shooting up your old backbone and throughout your entire system. You'll feel so full of life you will shout to the world, "I'm a man and I can prove it!"

Sounds good, what? But listen! That isn't all. I'm not just promising these things. I guarantee them! It's a sure bet. Oh, boy! Let's ride.

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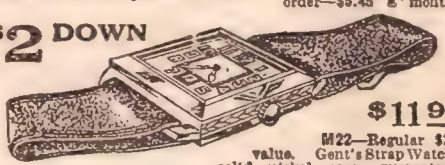

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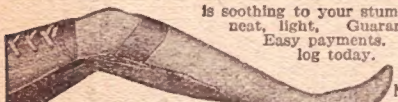

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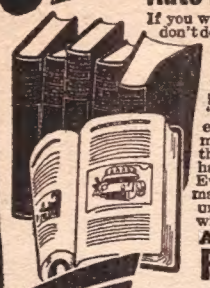

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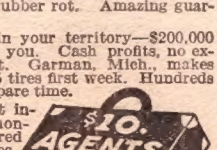

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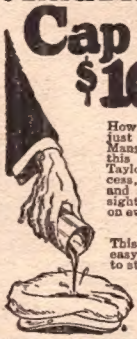

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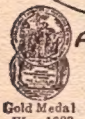

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